192 PAGES

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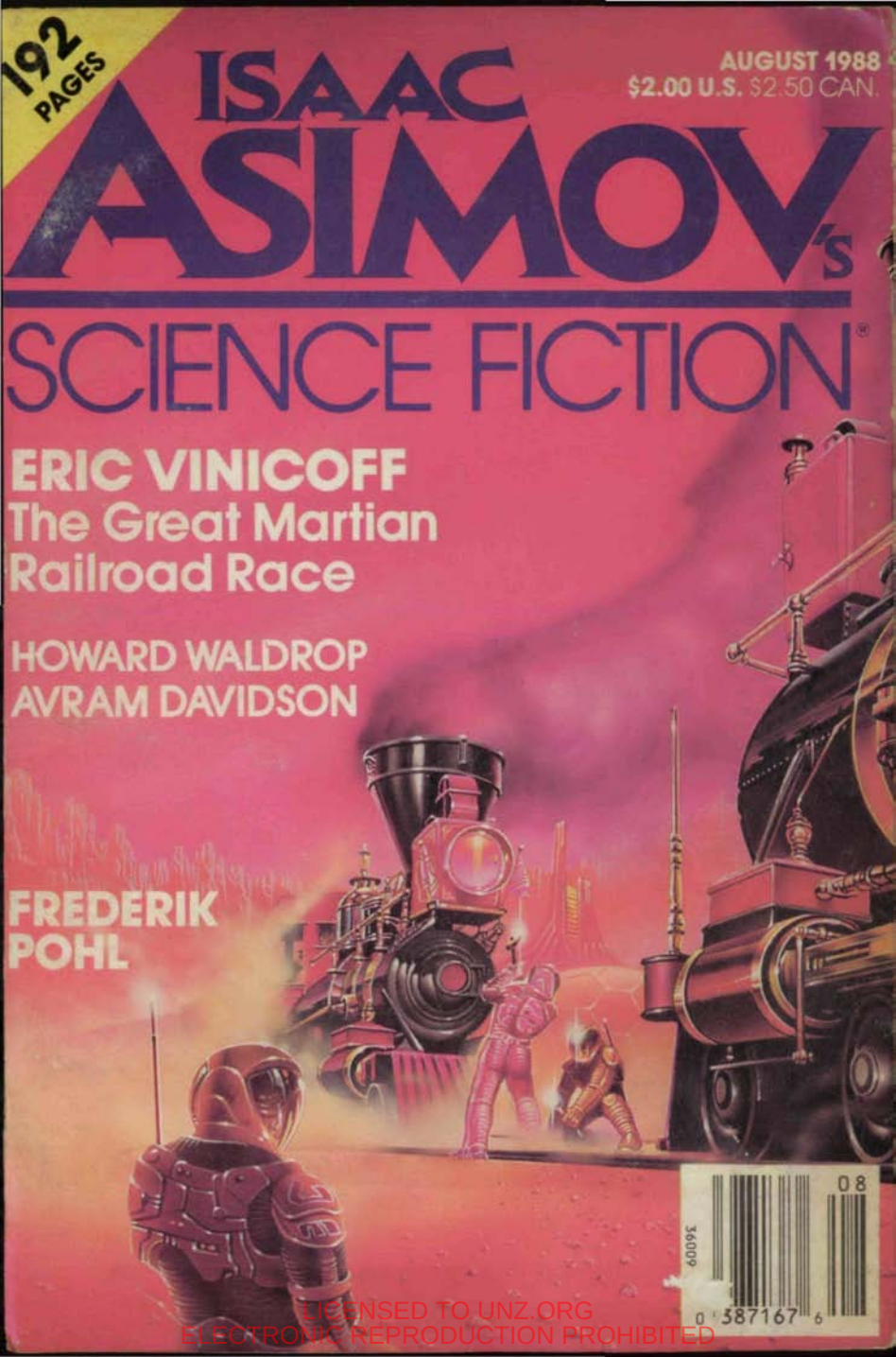

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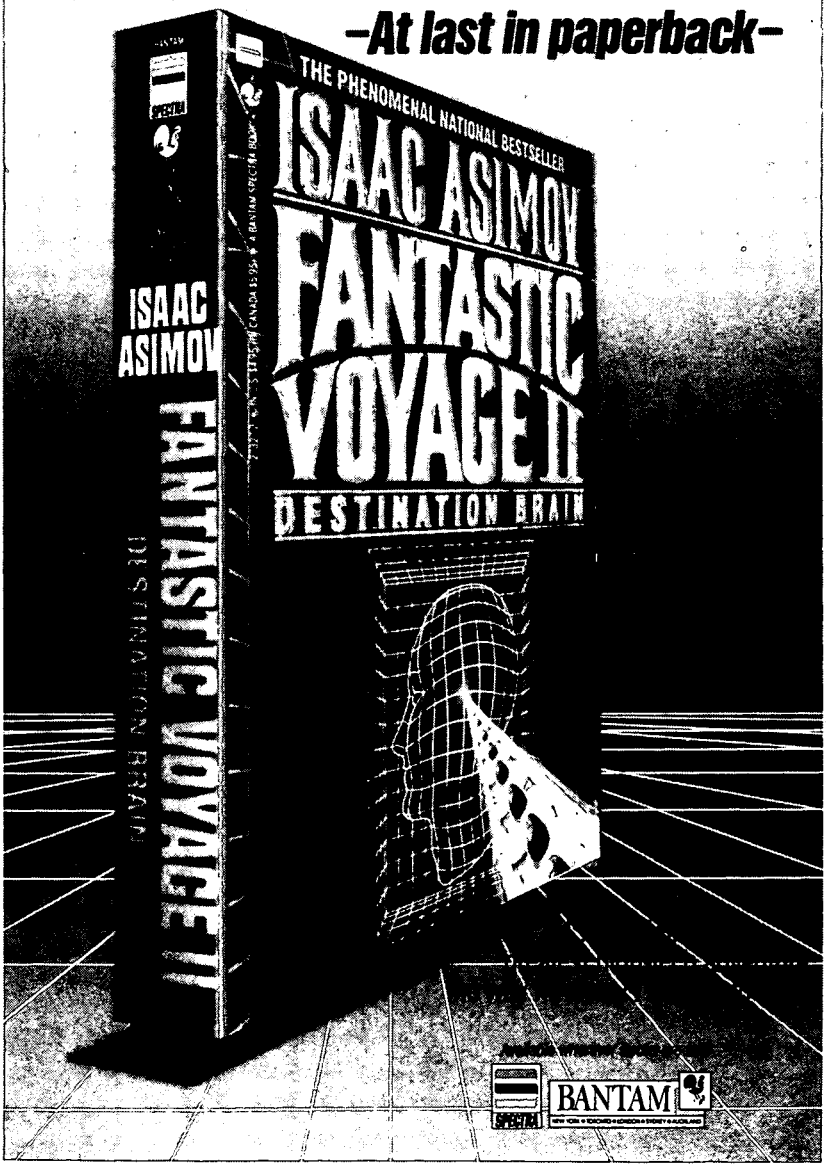

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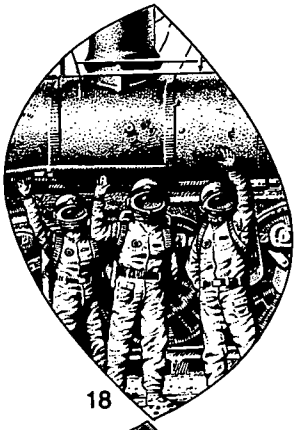

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

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Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director **Gardner Dozois:** Editor
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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

ACROPHOBIA

Just about everyone knows I don't use airplanes. I have been told that, in the United States, about ten percent of those who can afford to take airplanes to go here and there choose not to, but travel (if they must) by ground transportation.

Some people find this odd and I have frequently been asked by reporters why I don't fly. I have tried to give them every possible answer but nothing helps. For instance, I know that most of them think it is a matter of cowardice, so I say, "Because I'm afraid to." But that doesn't satisfy them; it's too easy. I suppose they want me to squirm.

I got into a taxi once and asked to be taken to the railroad station. He said, "Not the airport?" (The airport is farther off and would net the driver more money.)

"No," I said, "the railroad station."

"What's the matter?" said the driver, a keen philosopher like most taxi drivers, "You a coward?"

"How can you say I'm a coward," I demanded, "when I just voluntarily got into a New York taxi." For some reason, that angered him.

Some reporters say, "Isn't it strange that someone like you, Dr. Asimov, who writes stories in which you travel throughout the galaxy won't take airplanes?"

To which I have two answers:

1) "I write mystery stories, too, and I have never shot anyone."

2) "After traveling all over the galaxy, what's the excitement in flying all over this piddling little planet?"

Actually, though, I have severe acrophobia (that is, a morbid fear of heights—which is a very common affliction). I didn't know I had this condition until I was nineteen years old. In that year, I took a young lady to the New York World's Fair of 1939. I was very much taken with this young lady and I suggested we go on the roller coaster. I did this for a nefarious reason. I thought that when it swooped down, the young lady would be rendered helpless with terror and she would be unable to resist the burning kisses I intended to shower on her face.

It didn't work that way. We got up to the top of the first climb, went over it and dropped down in free fall, and that's when I discovered I was a severe acrophobe. I screamed

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steadily for the entire ride, and crawled out of the car at last, far more dead than alive. The young lady had sat, calm and untouched by any untoward emotion, throughout the drive.

I presume that my acrophobia plays some role in my reluctance to take an airplane, but not much. After all, the late, great editor John W. Campbell, Jr., was also an acrophobe and when he stayed in a hotel, he always insisted on a room no higher than the third floor. I, however, will take a room on any floor, and I live in an apartment on the thirty-third floor. I admit that I don't like to go out on the balconies or to lean out the windows and look straight down.

I think that a stronger influence on my dislike of flying is a rather more general dislike I have. I hate to travel. I like the comfort of my own bed, my own kitchen, my own bathroom, my own apartment, my own city. When I am forced to go off on a trip, I do my level best to make it as short as possible both in space and in time and I am always delighted to come home again.

This, too, offends people, who constantly hymn the joys of travel into my ear. I don't know why this is. I have never in my life tried to argue anyone into *not* traveling. I am perfectly willing to let people travel if they feel like it, but they are not willing to let me not travel if I feel like it.

A couple I know, for instance, are always traveling, and have been all over the world, sampling the

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joys of dysentery in dozens of different places. They were also great tennis buffs until he destroyed his back and she her hip. They always lecture me on my refusal to travel and to play tennis. The fact that my digestion is perfect and my skeleton is all in one piece does not seem to cut any ice.

And now a psychologist has written an article entitled "From 'Nightfall' to Dawn: Asimov as Acrophobe."

Apparently, he is of the opinion that my acrophobia enters into my fiction and explains a lot.

He got this idea first as a result of *The Robots of Dawn* in which my hero, Elijah Baley, is terrified of an airplane ride. However, this was not the effect of acrophobia but of agoraphobia (the morbid fear of open places). I make a big fuss in all the Elijah Baley books concerning his agoraphobia because he has lived all his life in an underground city.

This is a reflection of the fact that Horace Gold, the editor who persuaded me to write *The Caves of Steel,* was a severe agoraphobe and it struck me as something that would be useful as a plot device.

From the fact that I describe agoraphobic fears very realistically, the conclusion is that I must suffer from agoraphobia.—Except that I don't. I'm not the least bit afraid of open spaces.

I admit that I enjoy enclosed places because I like the feeling of privacy. Thus, the room in which I do my typing has the blinds perpetually drawn and I work under artificial light even on the brightest of sunlit days. However, my word processor is in my living room in which the blinds are always up and in which the sunlight floods in unimpeded since we are on the top floor and face Central Park with exposures in three directions. And I work just as well there as I do in my enclosed room. And although I love the canyons of New York, I also walk freely in Central Park (and no, I've never been mugged in either place).

Again, in my story "The Martian Way" I describe space walks. I have my characters floating in space (attached by tether to their ship) and *enjoying* the sensation. I described the euphoria very well and, in fact, when, some fifteen years later, space walks actually took place, the euphoria was there as I had described it.

Does that mean that *I* would love to space walk? Not on your life. *Nothing* could get me into a rocket ship in the first place and even if I were knocked out and placed on one, nothing could get me to leave it in space.

Or what about my story "Nightfall." In it the characters are terribly afraid of enclosed places. They all have severe "claustrophobia" (the precise opposite of agoraphobia). What's more, I describe the claustrophobic sensations accurately.

Does that mean that I am myself a claustrophobe? No. You simply can't have it both ways. The fact

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Novelette

1. **RACHEL IN LOVE, PAT MURPHY**
2. Yanqui Doodle, James Tiptree, Jr.
3. On the Border, Lucius Shepard
4. Winter's Tale, Connie Willis

(tie) 4. The Moon and Michelangelo, Ian Watson

5. Dinosaurs, Walter Jon Williams

Short Story

1. **WHY I LEFT HARRY'S ALL-NIGHT HAMBURGERS, LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS**
2. To Hell With The Stars, Jack McDevitt
3. The Little Magic Shop, Bruce Sterling
4. Angel, Pat Cadigan
5. Silent Night, Ben Bova

Best Poem

1. **THE FAMOUS HOSPITALITY OF DAO'I, J.J. HUNT**
2. The Gift, Joe W. Haldeman
3. Nazca Lines, Roger Dutcher and Robert Frazier
4. Science Fiction, Jane Yolen
5. Curse of the Demon's Wife, Bruce Boston

(It should probably be noted here that Robert Frazier, our most frequently-used poet, split a large number of first place votes among the *eleven* different poems by him that we ran in the magazine in 1987.)

Best Interior Artist

1. **J.K. POTTER**
2. Gary Freeman
3. Terry Lee
4. Janet Aulisio
5. Bob Walters

Best Cover Artist

1. **BOB EGGLETON**
2. J.K. Potter

(tie) 3. Gary Freeman

(tie) 3. Terry Lee

4. Hisaki Yasuda
5. Joe Bergeron

I neglected to add a "Best Serialization" category to this year's ballot—we only ran two serials in 1987, afterall—but there were so many write-in votes for one particular serialization, and so many other voters who attached letters to their ballots chiding me for *not* providing a place to vote for this particular work, that we've decided to add an additional award, a "Special Award," by popular acclaim, to:

I, ROBOT: THE MOVIE, HARLAN ELLISON

The awards were presented at a party at the United Nations Plaza Hotel in New York City on April 23, 1987; *Analog's* AnLab Awards were also presented at this time, as were the 1987 Science Fiction Gaming Awards. Five out of six of the *IAsfm's* winners were on hand to accept their awards, in addition to dozens of other writers, editors, agents, artists, and poets, as well as many representatives of the gaming community. After the party, the party attendees practically took over a local restaurant; a few hours later, the most hardy—or perhaps the most foolhardy—retired to the bar of the Doral Park Avenue hotel, where the merrymaking continued long into the night, the last surviving Party Animal reportedly staggering off in the direction of its room somewhere around 4 A.M.

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Asimov,

THE PENALTY

Reading SF has always provided more than a casual distraction for me. I find that the fanciful flights of my favorite authors stimulate many hours of contented reflections while providing me with an ever broadening point of view. Your monthly publication *IAsfm,* which I share—both the magazine and the subscription fee—with a friend, has frequently delighted both of us in the quality and diversity of its stories, so much so, we decided to renew our subscription. As you know, this year's subscription fee included a collection of stories by Mr. Asimov, offered as an added inducement for renewal. It is my firm opinion that any attempt to entice people into monetary expenditures should lead to a gratifying experience for the buyer, or future transactions will suffer noticeably. Should you plan to insult your readers next year with another such "reward," please let me know so that I may cancel my subscription.

Regretfully yours,

R. B. Dean

No insult is intended. I assure you that no reward will be forced on you. Just state on your subscription renewal that you don't want my crummy collection. And if it is sent to you by mistake, just throw it away. The offer is meant only for those readers who like a little something for nothing once in a while. I am told there are *such people.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Your recent remark concerning how the New Wave was unsuccessful by its own standards because it failed to "wipe out the Old Wave" caught my interest because while I was doing research for an anthology called *The Best of the New Wave* (which was co-edited with Martin H. Greenberg, and which Jim Frenkel intended to publish as a Blue Jay Book), I found no statements by any "New Wave" authors that they had any such intention.

This is not to say that certain authors might not have been hoisted by their own petard during convention appearances or personal conversations or while writing for fanzines—my research certainly wasn't that thorough, although I did find a rather tantalizing remark by Colin Wilson in his "Science Fiction as Existentialism" essay concerning the "Old Guards' " reaction to a speech by Harlan Ellison. Wilson, however, did not elaborate.

In any case, considering the "New

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Wave's" debt to Bester, Cordwainer Smith, the Kuttner/Moore team, Budrys, Sturgeon, Knight, the early satires of Pohl and Kornbluth, certain works by Keyes and Sherred, etc., not to mention its connection to authors of high fantasy such as Mervyn Peake, such a goal would have been impossible to achieve.

I might point out here, however, that Michael Moorcock's purpose in publishing the kind of fiction he did in *New Worlds*, the pillar of the New Wave, was not to wipe out the Old Guard. Moorcock didn't really care one way or the other, he merely wanted to find and publish fiction that would present images of the then-present and future in new, interesting, and provocative ways. Sometimes he succeeded. Sometimes he didn't. There was never one hundred percent agreement, which is, I suspect, the way Michael liked it.

Basically the New Wave was evolutionary, not revolutionary. Three points may help to prove this. First, Heinlein's early fiction and the Don A. Stuart stories made their initial impact on the field because of their then-innovative style as much as their content. The same may be said for Sturgeon, Bradbury, and anybody else you'd care to add. Furthermore, while it's basically true that authors such as Clement and yourself made an impact via their powers of logic, nobody really would have given a damn if they hadn't possessed (and still do) styles interesting and/or pleasant to read. Also, the impact of *Dune* and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* on the field in the sixties can hardly be underestimated.

Secondly, J.G. Ballard published his first short story in 1956. Dick, Ellison, and Silverberg were already making their marks as professionals, but like Ballard, their best work was still to come. Bunch, Aldiss, Brunner, and a handful of other writers who contributed important experimental writings appeared soon afterward. Some authors, such as Farmer, always staked out the cutting edge, often at great professional risk. And the story Marty and I selected as the most successful example of Fritz Leiber's far-out, with-it, rad, fab, gear sixties' style—"The Inner Circles"—was actually written in 1958, entire weeks before the sixties started. It was evidently purchased but not published by *Esquire*. Which brings me to point three:

Although the New Wave was as much influenced by (off-beat) mainstream writing as it was by SF, its influence in the States has been pretty much relegated to the field. That's because science fiction (and fantasy, and horror, even "best-seller" horror) is like a second reading language, regardless of its level of sophistication. It's far easier for the fifteen-year-old SF addict to learn how to appreciate Dickens and Fuentes than it is for the Updike and Oates reader to learn how to appreciate Lovecraft and Zelazny.

I don't mean for anyone to think I'm making some kind of subjective judgement about SF from this—it's just a fact of reader psychology. For the last fifty years SF has built up a complex vocabulary of conventions, images, themes, whathaveyou. And while some authors such as Niven and Pournelle have mastered the fine art form of the SF

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bestseller, I'd still wager most of their readers regularly read SF. It's just that there are more of them than there used to be, and one reason why is because of the combined efforts of the New and Old Waves.

Ah! Are there still doubters in the audience? You are holding in your hands the latest issue of *Asmov's*, named after and watched over by an undisputed master of the Old Wave, currently being edited by Gardner Dozois, historically one of the best Young Turks of the New Wave period—and the magazine publishes regularly, though not exclusively, authors on the current cutting edge—Shepard, Rucker, Bishop, Fowler, Sterling, Robinson, and a host of others and a cast of thousands. This is as it should be.

Not revolutionary, but evolutionary. And I respectfully submit, Dr. Asimov, that should Jim find a publisher for *The Best of the New Wave*, providing you with the opportunity to view my entire case should you choose, you might find yourself changing your own mind about the degree of the movement's success.

Best,

Arthur Cover
Grenada Hills, CA

Everything is evolutionary in a way. Copernicus kept Ptolemy's circular orbits and epicycles. Einstein kept Maxwell's equations. However, heliocentrism did totally eliminate geocentrism, and relativity did totally eliminate absolute space and time. I suspect that the Young Turks thought that the Old Wave would sink without a trace, even if they didn't say so officially, but it didn't. Who knows? Maybe there will always be stories with beginnings, middles, and ends, written in straight English.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I've just recently started reading your mag—since coming to college. Now I'm addicted. I look for the magazine in the bookstore once a week. I somehow have the feeling that the more I look, the quicker it will come.

Regarding the November 1987 issue, I loved every story. I found one mistake in the *I, Robot: The Movie* script. There was a *Whiz Comics* #1 vol 1. It was published under the name *Flash Comics*. There are only twelve known copies in the world, and as of now they are priceless. They have never been sold.

I heard you speak at Vassar. Loved it.

Sincerely,

Michael D. Lehman
Elmira, NY

Ah, but you should hear Harlan speak. He's completely different from me, but also great. —Wait, that sounds immodest. Let me rephrase it. —He's completely different from me, but manages to be great, anyway. —Hmm, that still sounds immodest. I guess that's why other people can be modest. They know how.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

The real difference between detectives and the rest of us is well

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illustrated by Connie Willis's "Winter's Tale." As an undergraduate English major I was once given the odious task of writing a research paper on "the second-best bed." I was surprised to find any academic material on such a subject but there was actually quite a bit of serious speculation and research into why Will left his wife that bed. I wrote my paper and collected my A never realizing that I had overlooked all those clues to the real story. Thank goodness Ms. Willis did not. That's why she is an author and I am a reader. Fantastic! Keep publishing stories as good as this and, I promise, I'll keep reading.

Sincerely,

Shelley Barber
Stuttgart, AZ

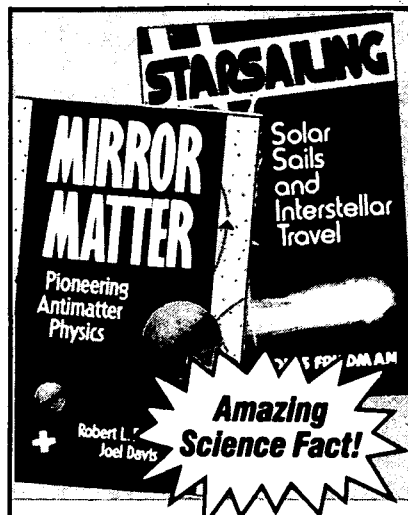
Yes, it's called imagination. I once wrote a story about Professor Moriarty's monograph, "Dynamics of an Asteroid" (as mentioned by Conan Doyle who clearly knew nothing about the subject). By the time I was done, I had deduced from the name alone the attempted destruction of the Earth.

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlemen:

How wonderful of you to give us Harlan Ellison's screenplay. And how thoughtful to provide a glossary at the end.

There is perhaps a small error in the glossary. I believe you will find that the Steadicam and its imitators are not gyroscopically stabilized at all. Gyroscopes would produce surprising motions in response to the operator's forces.



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Steadicams are stabilized with damped springs and counterweights.

Sincerely yours,

Richard Kimmel
Chicago, IL

If there's anyone who knows less about mechanical engineering than Harlan does, it's I. So I'll just say you're very likely right.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac, Gardner, Sheila, and all:

Normally, I am a reserved person. If something is amazingly great to someone else I'll say it was good, or okay. If I really enjoy a book or story I'll say it was "decent" or "worth reading." But your serialization of *I, Robot: The Movie* was Fabulous! Thrilling! Enthralling! All of those words that you see on the blurbs of paperbacks apply!

I wanted to write after the first installment, but I waited. It was hard, waiting to tell you how much fun it was to read a movie script, something I've never done before. Everything was so vivid, all the sets and scenes and effects; WOW! It's just a completely different experience to read a script than it is to read a book. Thanks for the opportunity.

And to Harlan: Got any more unproduced scripts laying around, gathering dust? Send 'em in!

And to Warner Bros.: You poor, poor fools. Boy, did you lay an egg by letting this one slip by.

I have only one complaint about the last three issues in which the serial appeared. In December, what happened to "On Books"? At first I thought I had overlooked it, then I thought maybe you had moved it somewhere, but a glance at the contents told me that it was actually not there! eeeeek! A month without "On Books"! It was like eating toast without butter, macaroni without cheese. But, if you needed room for *I, Robot*, then it's okay. Just don't do it again!

I read somewhere, in an article by some reviewer in one of the best of the year anthologies, a statement which got me to thinking. He said that your name on the cover of *IAsfm* was actually holding the magazine back, keeping the average newsstand browser from thinking that he could find new, exciting fiction in a magazine labeled *Asimov's*. What do you think? I like the name on the magazine, and the quality of fiction never drops or stays old fashioned just because of the names. All one has to do is read one story to see that an old timer's name doesn't mean old time stories. But maybe there is that initial barrier keeping some people from picking up *Asimov's* because they think they'll find old pulp fiction. Any comments?

Paul Strain
Danville, IL

Let's reason it out. Let us suppose that my name on the magazine does indeed induce the thought "Old time stuff. Forget it." In that case, my name on a novel ought to induce non-reading on a huge scale. But it doesn't. My novels, whether published this year, or thirty-five years ago, sell well. Consequently, we conclude that my name can't hurt the magazine.

—Isaac Asimov

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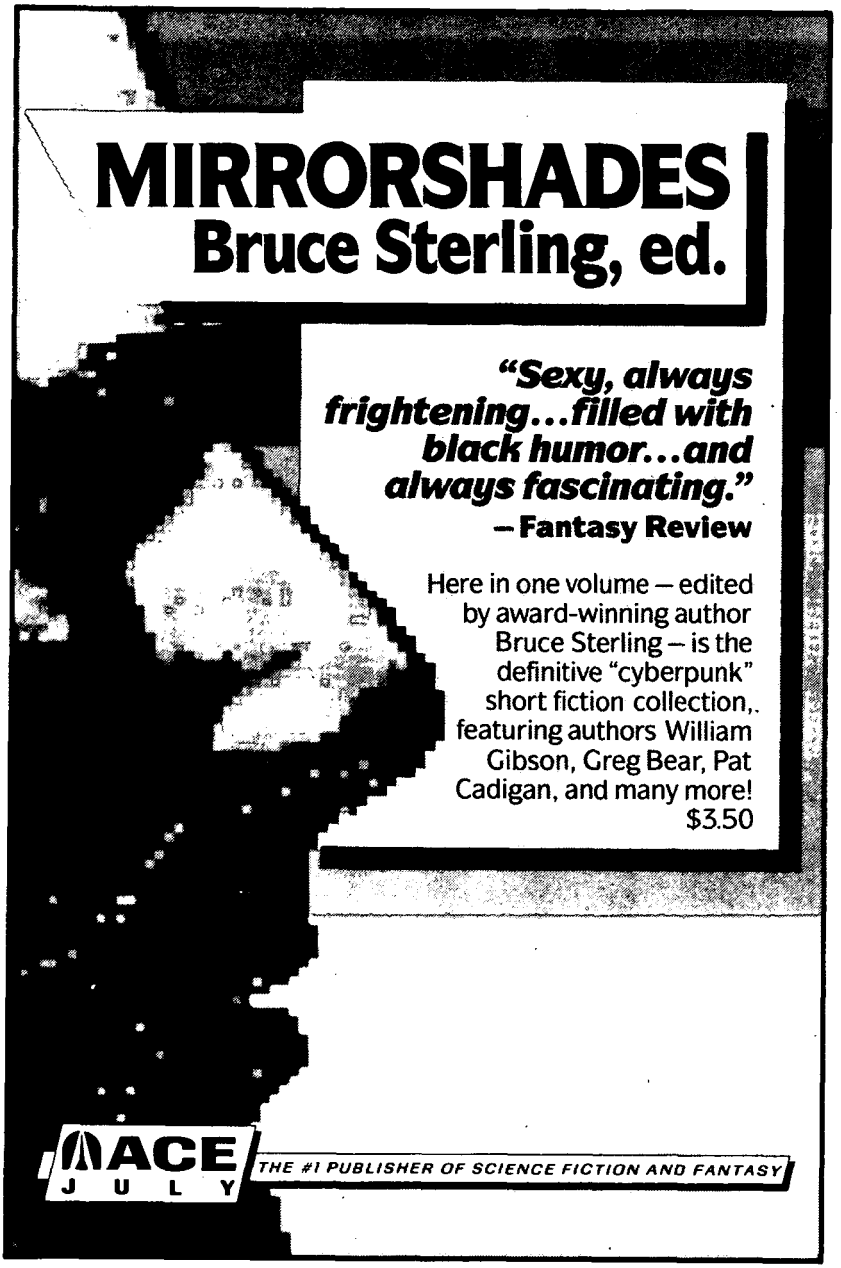
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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

At last year's big game convention an event occurred that left everyone feeling pretty good. Now, you must remember that the professional game designer community can resemble, at times, a gossipy tea party. It's not an unusual experience to be talking to one designer complaining about another designer's work, and then move over to hear a similar litany from the person you were just speaking about.

Like a lot of things in life, you take it all with a grain of salt.

But when Mike Gray's game *Fortress America* won the award for best contemporary historical game there was a general sense of satisfaction and pleasure that filled the small auditorium.

Fortress is a smashing game. Even though its theme of the Next War, with third-world coalitions invading the good old USA and the much-ballyhooed Star Wars in place, ready to defend the homeland, is more futuristic than historical, no one minded that anomaly.

But, to most of the convention attendees, *Fortress America* represented a victory of a different kind. It was produced by Milton Bradley, the same people who bring us *Candy Land* and *Twister*. It was the fourth game in their Gamemaster series and, with its miniature plastic hovercraft, infantry, and particle beam weapons, it showed what one of the big boys could do when turned loose on a strategy game for adults.

Both game players and professionals were glad that the game won. And we looked forward to the next game in the series.

Now, there is *Shogun* (Milton Bradley Company, Springfield, MA 01101), the best game in the Gamemaster series so far. It's a rich, detailed game—and the most complex of the Gamemaster series. But the actual gameplay flows smoothly. The production values are on a par with the previous entries, like *Fortress America* and *Axis and Allies*. It would be a great game to play even if it weren't so wonderful to look at.

The game is set in sixteenth century Japan. Beautiful, traditional water-color illustrations of combat decorate the board and playing aids, all done in the delicate style that belies the violence that must have filled the grand clashes between warlords. As with all the Gamemaster games, *Shogun* comes with a host of plastic miniatures.

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But this time designer Mike Gray has added some delightful surprises.

There are over a hundred plastic military units, including Samurai, Ashigaru Gunners, Ronin, Archers, and, an assassin for hire, the Ninja. Each player also has a castle to store his/her pieces and plan his/her strategy for the next round. For the first time, a Gamemaster game uses cards—employed here in a Risk-like fashion to allocate territories and keep track of the number of provinces a Warlord controls. The cards are also used to secretly record where a Warlord's hidden mercenary army of Ronin might appear.

With an Occidental bow to the Oriental concepts of fate and karma, the game comes with five miniature samurai swords. If no player has bid for the right to the first move (and attack) the swords are hidden and each player draws one. The swords carry anywhere from one to five diamonds. The player with the highest sword goes first.

As mentioned, *Shogun* is more complex than the other Gamemaster games. But in play, it is anything but slow-moving.

Players start the game with three armies, led by Daimyos. The Daimyos and their attendant samurai, spearmen, and gunners, are kept on a separate card off the board. A single standard-bearer on the board represents that army. Each player receives koku, with one koku equal to the amount of rice a soldier needs to live for a year. Koku can be used to purchase new units, claim the "Sword" for first turn, build a castle, hire Ronin (who can be assigned secretly to a province), or hire the Ninja.

After all the players have deposited their koku in the appropriate slots on their castle, everyone reveals their plans. The winning bidder gets the sword or the Ninja. In case of a tie, no one gets that item.

Then the action begins. Each Warlord moves his Daimyo's armies, whose ability to move increases as they grow in experience. Battles are fought against adjacent armies or occupied provinces. Ronin are revealed, often turning the tide in a close battle. The player controling the Ninja can elect to attempt an assassination of an opponent's Daimyo, or use the Ninja to spy on the next round's planning.

Shogun comes with an unprecedented 12 twelve-sided dice, and you'll need all of them. During a battle, an army attacks in order dependent on ability and range. First bowmen and gunners fire, and casualties are removed. Then Daimyos, swordsmen, and others attack. Each type of warrior has a different "to-hit" number, with samurai bowmen being the strongest. But an army is limited in the number of samurai it can have, and lowly spearmen can be important in determining the outcome.

The object of the game is to be the player who controls thirty-five provinces (though the rules say that a game could be played until there is only one Warlord left). ●

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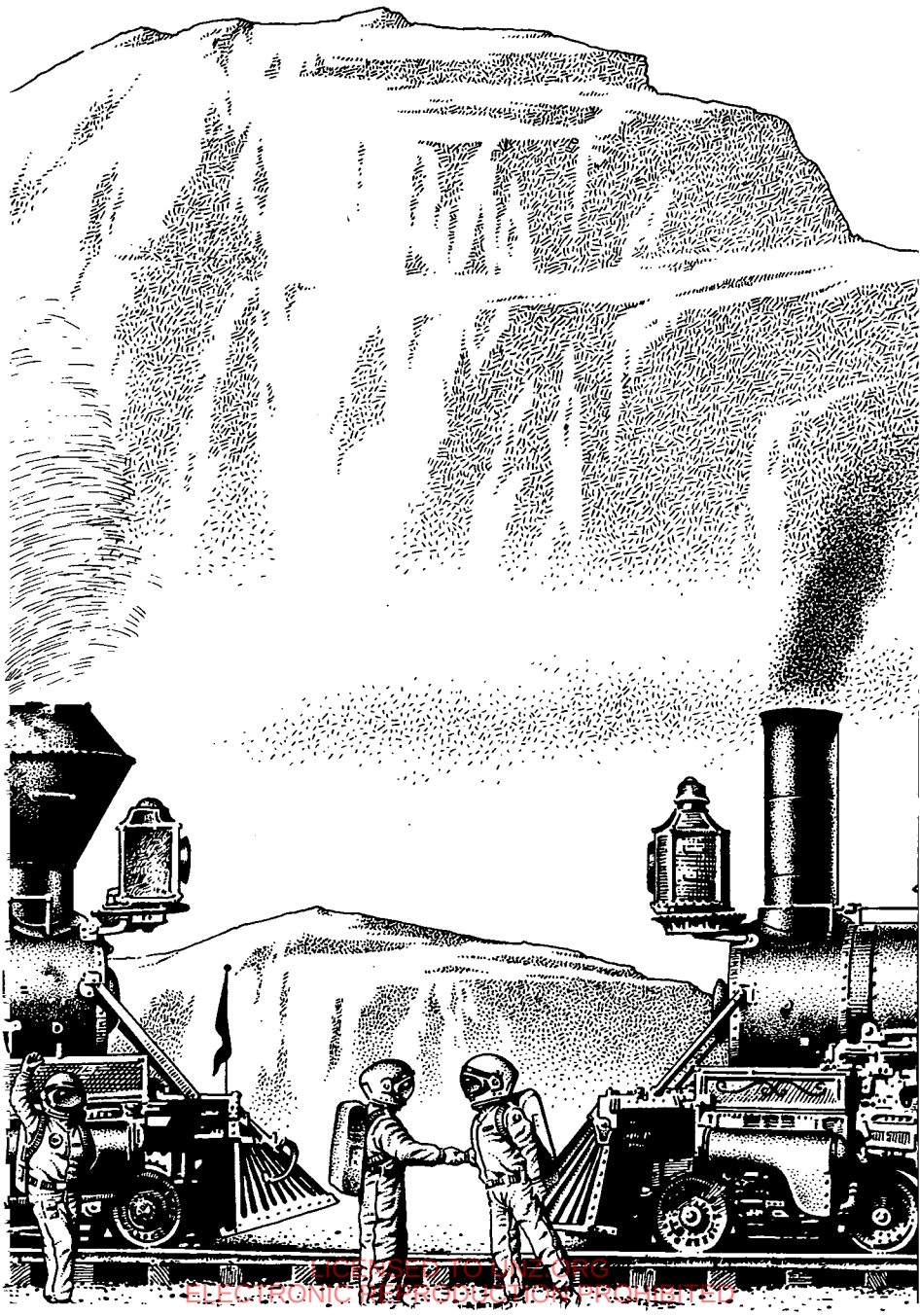

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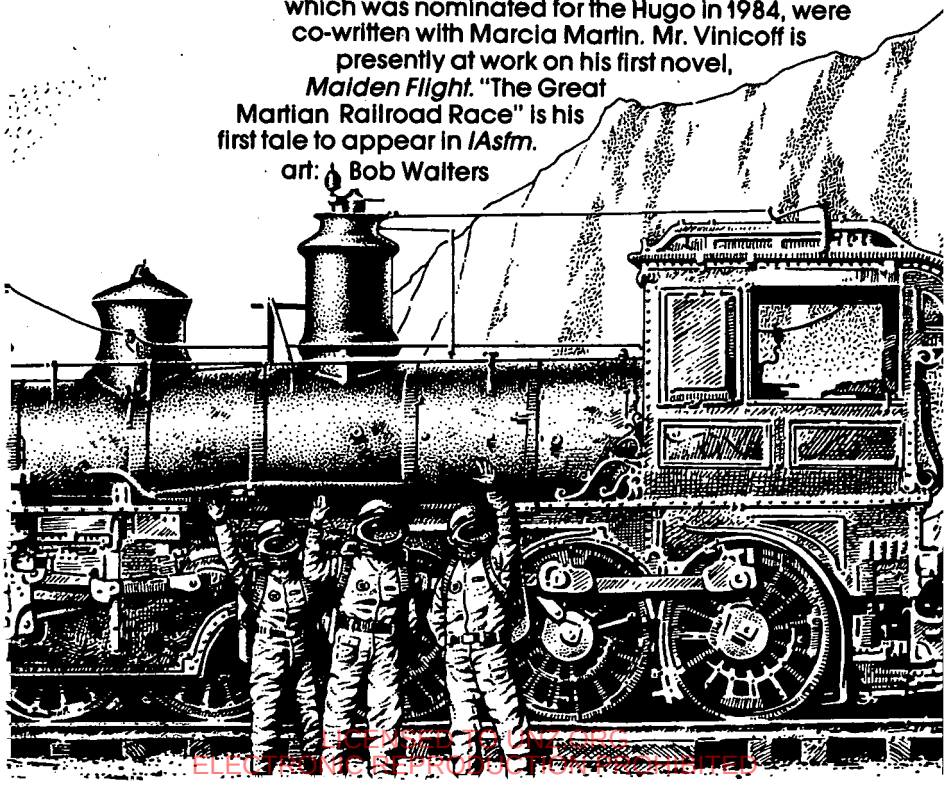
THE GREAT MARTIAN RAILROAD RACE

by Eric Vinicoff

The author began writing professionally in 1975 and has since sold over forty stories to science fiction magazines and anthologies. Many of these stories, including "The Weigher" which was nominated for the Hugo in 1984, were co-written with Marcia Martin. Mr. Vinicoff is presently at work on his first novel, *Maiden Flight*. "The Great Martian Railroad Race" is his first tale to appear in *IAsfm*.

art: Bob Walters



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"What this planet needs, Candice, is a railroad."

Timothy Lo made the comment as he walked through the deboarding tube toward the terminal. He made it to his personal assistant, a cryogenic Danish beauty. They were alone in the tube, since the shuttle captain had escorted them to the airlock ahead of the less important passengers.

"You've certainly found the right setting for your venture," she said. "You won't need your rose-colored glasses."

His glasses were thick and clear. But the afternoon sky outside the tube was a gently luminescent pink. A small bright sun sent rays skittering across the rippling ice fields, glazing the metal of the port facilities.

They were still adjusting to the surreal experience of walking in the .38 *g* when they reached the terminal. "Look sharp," he told her. "The curtain is going up."

A reception committee was waiting in the almost-empty concourse. Masa Kobiashi, the CEO of the North Polar Consortium, stood in front of a row of vice-presidents. "Six VPs," Timothy Lo whispered. "They aren't sure they want in, but they are taking me seriously."

The Consortium contingent bowed in unison; he bowed back. Candice had slipped into her role of minor functionary and non-person.

"Welcome to Mars, Mister Lo," Masa Kobiashi said. "I trust your trip was enjoyable?"

"Very much so, thank you."

"I've arranged suitable quarters for you at the Residence. You've been cleared through United Nations Customs, and your bags will be forwarded. Shall we go?"

"By all means."

Three limos were parked in front of the terminal, their open doors suckled by entry tubes. A spacecap in a snug JSL red-and-white marssuit was tending the tubes. Without the suit he would have been rather uncomfortable. The air pressure was less than one percent of Earth sea level, with very little oxygen, and the temperature was a balmy −115 degrees.

But the entry tubes were an extension of the friendly environment senior execs preferred, and so were the stretched Toyota Ultimas with their fat traction tires. Timothy Lo settled into a conforming seat in the first limo, beside Candice and facing Masa Kobiashi.

"We can take the long way around," the CEO said, "if you care to see more of the Consortium."

Timothy Lo smiled. The most important businessman in the solar system didn't offer to play tour guide idly. "I do indeed."

Masa Kobiashi touched a button. "Take us out Radial Two," he told

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the autocon, "then left on Circum Seven to the Consortium Administration Center. Residence, level six."

As the limo pulled away from the curb, the flagship leading the fleet, Timothy Lo took a comprehensive look at the port.

At first glance, it resembled the contents of a toy chest scattered across the ice. Then the pattern and scale emerged. A ring of buildings, shipyards, and storage tanks enclosed dozens of cradles. Highways and pipelines ran into the tundra, linking the port to the company complexes. The spaceships were shiny silver globes, ranging from the passenger shuttle that loomed over the JSL terminal to the really big cargo drones. He was impressed. Wealth was his religion, and he liked his temples grandiose.

Masa Kobiashi noticed his interest. "North Polar Port handles more tonnage than any other facility on Earth or Mars. Raw materials from the belt and Jupiter's moons, manufactured goods to Earth, petrochemicals and organics from Earth, and supplies to the miners."

"With the Consortium making a tidy profit on each leg," Timothy Lo observed. "Likewise EIP at the South Pole. I'm curious how Mars managed to become the hub of space industry?"

"Well, for one thing, it's closer to the mining activities than Earth is—close being a relative term involving escape velocities as well as distances. But the main reason is all around us. Look over there."

The highway cut laser-straight through the uneven terrain; they were sharing it with a lot of vehicles, mostly trucks. Off to the right a metal globe at least fifteen meters in diameter was rolling across the ice. It reminded Timothy Lo of a snowball, because it left a path of bare rock behind it. There was a Komatsu logo on its side.

"A water collector," Masa Kobiashi explained. "A robot drone, of course—there are hundreds of them working the cap. Water to drink, water for industrial use, oxygen to breathe, and hydrogen and oxygen for rocket fuel. More than we'll ever need. That is why we're here."

Masa Kobiashi suggested drinks, and they gave their orders to the bar. When they had glasses in their hands the CEO said, "You've come a long way on an interesting errand, Mister Lo. But maybe an impossible one."

"It's eminently possible. You think so, too, or one of your VPs would be making meaningless noises to me now."

Masa Kobiashi frowned momentarily at the crudeness. "Your reputation precedes you. You've been successful in the investment business due to good judgment and, ah, creative techniques. Your current net worth is in excess of two hundred million dollars. But you've never operated a railroad."

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"My compliments to your espionage network. Speaking of which, isn't it safe for you to conduct business in your office?"

Masa Kobiashi decided to be amused rather than insulted. "You may be right—one never knows for sure. Let's return to the topic of railroading, shall we?"

"Let's. I've never operated a railroad, but I've hired some people who have."

The limo curved left onto another highway, skirting an arched entrance that read: FUJI CHEMICALS CORPORATION. Beyond the archway a fantastic jungle of gleaming towers, tanks, pipes, and other shapes seemed to grow out of the ice.

"I think you've underestimated the engineering challenges involved in building your railroad," Masa Kobiashi said.

"How so?"

"The straight-line distance from pole to pole is 10,700 kilometers. Your route will have to be even longer, to avoid volcanoes, canyons, craters, and dust lakes. You'll have to lay track on permafrost. Then there are the sand and dust storms, with winds up to two hundred KPH. Martian dust is very fine. It gets into everything, and has an unfortunate effect on moving parts."

"Engineering problems can always be solved. That's what engineers are for."

They passed another entrance: NISSAN CORPORATION. Long, low buildings surrounded a terraced pyramid. "The car parts factory is fully automated," Masa Kobiashi explained. "The central structure is an arcology for the administrative and maintenance personnel. What makes you think we need a pole-to-pole railroad?"

"The North Polar Consortium consists of forty-six Japanese firms in a wide range of industries. The European Industrial Park isn't much smaller. You could be doing a lot of mutually beneficial business, if it weren't for the high cost of shipping by cargo drone."

"We did our own study of the potential trade. While substantial, it wouldn't justify the massive capital outlay needed to build such a railroad. How do you intend to make a profit, if I may ask?"

Timothy Lo smiled. "I've seen your study. All I can say is maybe you looked at the venture too narrowly."

"My compliments to *your* espionage network. So you hope to sell the Consortium a share of this railroad?"

"No."

"No?"

"It's going to be my railroad," Timothy Lo said firmly. "I've arranged financing with a group of banks, but they need loan guarantees way

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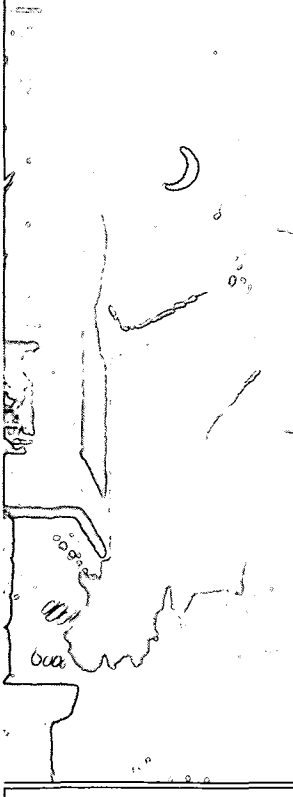

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beyond my own holdings. I want the Consortium to be my cosignatory, in exchange for very favorable terms in our shipping contracts."

"The benefit you offer hardly matches the risk we would be taking. I don't see how I can recommend it to our members."

Timothy Lo didn't respond for several seconds, then spoke in a level voice. "If I go bust, you get the railroad."

The Nippon Atomics entrance had a gate and a tall security fence. In the distance nine ominous white hemispheres rose above the complex, venting pale stream.

Masa Kobiashi was looking at him intently. The CEO thought that he was a fool, destined to fail. But was he a capable enough fool to build the railroad first? If so, the Consortium would acquire it at a bargain price.

"I think something can be arranged," Masa Kobiashi said at last. "When you're settled and rested, would you be willing to explain your venture in detail at a meeting with my department heads?"

"My pleasure."

"There is something you should know. You aren't the only person to approach us about a pole-to-pole railroad. Shortly after I received your prospectus, I was contacted by an Irish businessman named Michael Killeen."

Timothy Lo's face went blank. "I've never heard of him."

"His proposal was remarkably similar to yours."

"Thanks for telling me—seems I have some housecleaning to do. May I ask why you aren't talking to him instead of me?"

"He has ties to EIP," Masa Kobiashi replied. "He's there now, probably trying to negotiate a financial package."

"I see. If there's going to be a railroad, you don't want to be at the short end of it. Well, rest assured, there will be a railroad. Mine."

The UNSA didn't rate space in the United Nations compound; it had been exiled to three floors of an unassuming downtown office block. Timothy Lo sat in Director Obomi's anteroom while that official showed proper contempt for businessmen by making him wait. Beside him Candice was synopsizing reports in her hand computer.

"Mister Lo, the director will see you now." The secretary gestured to the inner door.

The office of Idi Obomi, Director of the United Nations Space Agency, wasn't very impressive even by bureaucratic standards. He rose from his desk wearing a colorful Mali tribal robe and a phony smile. "Good afternoon, Mister Lo." They shook hands. "I'm sorry about the delay. Thanks to the budget cuts everyone here is doing the work of three."

"That's quite all right. I appreciate you taking the time to see me."

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They sat. "Your notion is very imaginative," the director began. "But I doubt this agency can authorize the territorial grant you're seeking."

"Why not? Legally it's no different from the grants you made to the Consortium and EIP."

"The United Nations holds the solar system in trust for the benefit of the human race, and the UNSA acts as trustee. The polar grants were made to open Mars for exploration and exploitation."

"That's exactly why you need my railroad. Right now there are two polar enclaves, your Lowell Research Station, and a lot of empty planet. I'm sure you can see the potential in having rail access to 11,000 kilometers of Mars."

"If you were just asking for the right-of-way along your route, that could be arranged. But why do you need alternating five kilometer squares beside the right-of-way?"

"To make the venture financially viable. Some of it will be used for stations and other railroad facilities, the rest will go on the market."

"You expect the United Nations to give you 55,000 square kilometers of land so you can turn around and sell it?"

"Right now nobody wants the land. Except at the poles nothing on Mars is worth the cost of getting to it. When property values go up due to my railroad, why shouldn't I reap some of the benefit? Remember, the *other* 55,000 square kilometers along the line will belong to you. You'll come out way ahead."

Director Obomi developed a facial tic at the thought of more revenues for the UNSA to spend, but he was still reluctant. "Your proposed grant is bigger than both polar grants combined. It would be very hard to justify to the Secretary General, particularly after the media got hold of it."

Timothy Lo shook his head. "I share your vision of humanity's destiny in space. It saddens me to see that vision treated so shabbily."

"What do you mean?"

"You do wonders with limited resources, but you could do a lot more if you received proper support in the General Assembly. Small minds can't see how important your work is. Well, my railroad is going to open up a new frontier. Frontiers mean people. People pay taxes, vote, and need public services. You'll have to have a bigger budget, more staff, and," Timothy Lo's eyes flicked around the austere surroundings, "a suitable headquarters to handle your increased responsibilities."

When Timothy Lo left a few minutes later, a sincerely smiling Director Obomi walked him to the door. "I'll call you when I have a better idea where we stand."

"Thanks. It has been a pleasure."

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There followed several weeks of planning, organizing, and very discreet bribery. Finally the call came.

"Good news, I hope?" Timothy Lo asked.

"Yes and no," Director Obomi said. "The United Nations Space Agency is prepared to authorize your grant, in exchange for transportation service to Lowell and any other facilities we establish."

"What's the bad news?"

"We've received a similar application from the Ulster-Mars Railroad Company Ltd."

"Owned and operated by one Michael Killeen?" Timothy Lo asked through gritted teeth.

"I believe so. We're required to treat both applications equally, so we've borrowed a precedent from history. A railroad race."

"A what?"

"Curiously, you both proposed the same route," Director Obomi answered. "The equipment will be standardized. You'll start from the North Polar Consortium, and Ulster-Mars will start from the European Industrial Park. You'll build your rail lines until you meet. The more kilometers you cover, the more grant territory you get."

Timothy Lo didn't say anything for several seconds. "Who suggested this piece of fiscal insanity?" he asked at last. "Mister Killeen? I don't even know the gentleman, but I'm beginning to dislike him intensely."

"I'm sorry you're taking such a negative attitude," Director Obomi said stiffly. "Please come to my office Thursday morning at ten for a full briefing."

The Adachi Company complex was a cluster of reinforced glassite domes of a size possible thanks to the low Martian gravity. Hida Adachi's office occupied the top floor of the central dome, with a 360 degree view of the floodlit complex. The night was crowded with stars, and Phobos was rising in the west. Timothy Lo enjoyed the view while Hida Adachi settled behind his desk/monitor station. The office was a reflection of the Adachi Company; big, successful, and very high-tech.

"Welcome, Mister Lo," Hida Adachi said. "I'm honored to meet you. And fascinated, I might add. Your railroad is the most exciting project here since the founding of the Consortium."

"Thanks. It's a unique opportunity."

They chatted pleasantly for a few minutes, then Hida Adachi asked, "Is there some way the Adachi Company can help in your great project?"

"As a matter of fact there is." Timothy Lo slid a memory disk across the brushed steel desktop to Hida Adachi. "The details of what I need are in there. Shall I give you the general outline?"

"Please."

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"The Consortium doesn't think a railroad can be cost effective, but its calculations are based on building a lot of automated construction equipment. There's another way to go. Human labor. Thanks to the UNSA I have to lay track as fast as I can, so I'm hiring a five thousand man work gang."

Hida Adachi was used to big numbers, but not of that sort. "How can you possibly afford such a large work force?" he blurted out, his curiosity overcoming politeness. "Employees are even more expensive than machines."

"Not necessarily," Timothy Lo replied. "I've arranged to import five thousand Chinese peasants and their families. The Chinese government was glad to cut a deal—the birth control program hasn't been going well. They will be shipped here in cold sleep."

"But . . . why would they be willing to leave their home to come to this inhospitable place?"

"For land. They're farmers whose farms were taken over for government collectives. I'll be paying them in acreage instead of money."

Hida Adachi laughed. "Forgive me, but the notion of peasant farmers on Mars is hard to take seriously."

"It shouldn't be. You put a dome like this one over some land. Fill it with air—oxygen from water, nitrogen and carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. Run a line from a community reactor for heat and electricity. Melt ice for water or pump it out of the ground. Grind rock, and add some organics to make dirt. Stock it with plants and animals adapted to Martian conditions. You have a farm."

Hida Adachi thought it over. "The technical problems are more involved than you imagine, but not insurmountable. I'm sure we can build your farms for you. By mass producing them we should be able to make the price per unit very reasonable. But will you be able to afford five thousand?"

"You misunderstand me," Timothy Lo said. "I'm not in agribiz. You'll be selling them directly to the farmers, and running the power/water/air distribution business."

"That is absurd! They won't have any assets. How will they pay?"

"On credit, to be repaid with interest from the proceeds of crop sales. Food for the thirty-thousand-plus Consortium personnel around the solar system, who must be getting pretty tired of flavored algae." Timothy Lo shuddered. "And industrial organics that the Consortium now has to import from Earth or do without."

"What recourse would we have if a farmer defaults on his loan?"

"The tenacity of the Chinese peasant farmer is legendary. The whole family will work like slaves to keep their land. In the rare default, you can dispossess them and sell the farm to someone else."

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"That is a rather inhumane policy," Hida Adachi commented.

"I'm a railroad builder, not a philanthropist. When you review the complete package, you'll find that the projected long-term profits are very impressive."

Hida Adachi didn't seem impressed. "Even if we were interested in such a speculative market, we would require substantial down payments."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Timothy Lo said. "I guess I'll have to do business with EIP."

"I beg your pardon?" Hida Adachi leaned forward in his chair.

"Black Michael Killeen stole this idea from me along with the others. He's hiring five thousand Irishmen, Northern Protestants who aren't happy with the reunification. Verlagsgruppe will be building their farms, and more customers would mean more profits. I suppose that explains why Herr Zisser wants to meet with me."

Hida Adachi frowned thoughtfully, then put on a smile. "It would be unfortunate for our new neighbors to have to depend on goods and services from so far away. Let me study your proposal. Would it be possible to see you again in a few days, before you contact Herr Zisser?"

"Certainly."

Timothy Lo peered through the cockpit bubble at the activity stretching across the rock-strewn plain. Four hours ago the ATV had left the advance camp. At first the only human presence had been survey and geology crews, but gradually the terrain had become busier.

"ETA three minutes, sir," the autocon reported cheerfully.

The sausage-shaped ATV wove awkwardly through trucks and other vehicles on the access road that paralleled the roadbed. Work crews in color-coded marssuits swarmed everywhere. The access road was evolving from a raw path into the Pan Martian Highway. The roadbed was being cleared, excavated, poured with gravel-like ballast, and graded.

"It seems very well organized," Candice said.

"It had better be," Timothy Lo replied. "I don't like the reports I'm getting from down south. Black Michael's gang is laying over thirty-five kilometers of track a day."

His eyes kept wandering to the exotic scenery. In the distance the jagged rim of a broad crater dominated the plain. The pink sky was turning sunset-red, and a wind kicked up swirls of dust.

"Here we are, sir," the autocon reported.

Three portable domes had been inflated near the access road. The ATV parked in an informal lot beside the "construction shack." A sign over the shack's airlock read: NORTH MARTIAN RAILROAD COMPANY CAMP NO. 38.

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Two people were emerging from the airlock. Timothy Lo and Candice put on their helmets, waited while the autocon evaced the cabin, then climbed down to the frozen ground.

"It is good to see you again, Mister Lo," the smaller of the two said on his com channel. They shook hands.

Long ago he had realized that, while menials were interchangeable, having the right people in key positions was essential. He had discovered Doctor Seuki Nakano languishing in the Consortium's engineering department, a victim of the traditional Japanese reluctance to promote women. Now she was his Chief Engineer, doing the work of two for a fraction of the salary of one, and grateful for the opportunity to prove herself.

"Likewise," he replied. "I want you to know I'm very happy with your work. Don't worry about this visit—Candice isn't carrying my black hood and ax in her purse. I'm just here to watch my railroad being built."

Doctor Nakano had no sense of humor, but she laughed dutifully. "You timed your arrival perfectly. There will be something well worth seeing in a few minutes. Would you care to join me on my inspection turn?"

"By all means."

They set out toward the roadbed, and Candice and Doctor Nakano's translator/bodyguard fell in behind them. Halfway there a piercing siren came from Timothy Lo's helmet speaker.

"Shift changes are sounded on all channels," Doctor Nakano explained. "We had better move aside to avoid being trampled."

Floodlights on tall poles woke in unison, pushing back the gathering darkness beyond the camp, access road, and roadbed. Work crews poured out of the residence domes and trotted by in ranks. Timothy Lo switched his com through a few work channels. The babble of orders and conversations was in a variety of local dialects, many unintelligible to him, plus a quickly developing pidgin.

Soon the relieved work crews jogged past heading for the domes. "How are the workers holding up?" he asked Doctor Nakano.

"Amazingly well. I thought we would have serious labor trouble over the twelve-hour shift schedule, but they seem to have accepted it."

"You would understand why if you knew more about the working hours of a peasant farmer. They want to finish the job as fast as they can, so they can get their families out of cold storage and start farming."

Doctor Nakano made sure they were on the private channel. "The UNSA observers have been complaining about the opium and prostitutes. They want us to stop providing them."

"The job will be done long before the UN can pass a law. Meanwhile we get a contented work gang."

They stopped at the edge of the construction area and watched. Two

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tanker trucks were crawling side-by-side on the roadbed, spraying a liquid into the ballast.

"The sealant creates rigidity with sufficient give to resist seismic shock," Doctor Nakano explained. "It also insulates the track base from the permafrost. The only good thing I can say about permafrost as a platform is that it is marginally superior to dust."

A knot of frantic activity was approaching along the roadbed from the north, becoming clearer as it got closer. Flatbed trucks carrying prefab track sections were pulling off to the side of the access road. As each one stopped, a work crew materialized and manhandled the section into position, a feat that would have required cranes on Earth. The foreman ran around and gestured wildly. Everything was happening in an eerie silence.

The sections reminded Timothy Lo of his model train sets. A base of beams and ties was anchored in the ballast, and the two elevated guideways sat on rows of supports. Each guideway was a rounded alloy strip two meters wide and a half meter thick.

"In six weeks Hitachi will be delivering the first cars," he said. "I can't wait to see one of my trains gliding along that ribbon at three hundred KPH."

"It will be a beautiful sight."

Workers began bolting the sections together. Engineers moved along the track, making electrical connections and using lasers to align the guideway sections.

The trucks and tools and hundreds of workers never slowed. They were a colony creature, constantly fed, excreting track. North Martian was busy along 1700 kilometers of the line, but this was the focus.

Timothy Lo watched raptly as his railroad raced south.

"I'm glad to see you're all enjoying yourselves," Timothy Lo said, his voice amplified by the podium. "The next time you drop by, the drinks and tickets won't be on me."

Consortium execs, UN officials, celebrities, media reps, and potential customers jammed the new North Martian passenger terminal adjoining JSL's. The loud cocktail party babble subsided as they turned to listen.

"Don't worry—I'm saving my speech for the ceremony. But I do want to say a few words. Really just one word. Thanks. Thanks to everyone who helped build the North Martian Railroad."

His audience applauded. He smiled broadly and looked over their heads, through the tall windows. There had been some recent additions to the port; the North Martian headquarters buildings, the yard and the sidings to the port facilities.

"There's one more thing I want to say. ALL ABOOOARRRD!"

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North Martian conductors in sharp black uniforms began ushering the passengers through the row of entry tubes.

Except for its flat nose the Deimos Express was a standard maglev train, a descendant of the original Transrapid 06 design that the Japanese had bought from the Germans. The cars were gleaming aluminum and glassite. Below them, sideways-on, U-shaped skirts wrapped around the edges of the guideway.

Candice had gracefully collected Director Obomi, Masa Kobiashi, and the rest of his special guests. "Director, ladies, and gentlemen," he said, "we're going to have the best seats on the train. This way, please."

His private car was at the front end of the train. Like all of North Martian's passenger stock, it was a double-decker. The observation deck was styled like an Orient Express parlour car. Stewards showed his guests to their seats, while he settled into his and put on a throat mike.

"Welcome aboard the historic inaugural run of the Deimos Express," he said, and his voice rang throughout the train. "True, we've been operating on the northern part of the line for several months. But this will be the first train to travel from pole to pole." Unless Ulster-Mars' Sidhe Express arrives here first, he didn't add.

A feminine pseudovoice interrupted him. "The Deimos Express is now departing North Polar Port Station."

There was a barely perceptible moment of rising, then the train pulled out of the station. It accelerated smoothly, silently, and without vibration. The guideway banked for curves, offsetting the centrifugal force.

"Unlike the usual maglev system," he continued, "we're suspended above the track by magnetic attraction instead of repulsion. The magnets on the lower U-skirt arms are pulled up close to the ferromagnetic armature rails on the underside of the track. More magnets in the bend of each U keep the cars in lateral position. Traction and braking are by linear motor, reacting with a long stator in the track. The power comes from nuclear generators at the stations."

The train was rushing across an uneven ice field, gaining speed. The Sony electronics complex appeared off to the right; it swelled and shrank in seconds. The track passed over highways and other obstacles.

"Our freight trains are fully automated, and our passenger trains carry only a service staff. Sensors in the cars and the track keep the computers informed." He sighed theatrically. "I always wanted to be a train engineer. Now I own a whole railroad, but there aren't any engineers or engines anymore."

The Consortium was quickly being left behind. The tundra blurred close to the train, and the tenuous atmosphere whined faintly as it was pushed aside.

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"All of which is to say you're traveling on the finest railroad ever built. So relax and enjoy the ride."

The stewards began serving drinks. Personal service was a throwback to an earlier era, but North Martian had access to a vast pool of inexpensive labor.

Timothy Lo looked at his watch and smiled. He knew what was coming; the reactions of his guests should be interesting.

What came was a northbound freight hauling meat and produce to the Consortium. It hurtled toward them at a relative six hundred KPH. Only at the last split-second did it seem to move aside, a flash of silver less than three meters beyond the double panes.

The reactions were interesting.

"There's really no cause for alarm," he reassured them as the stewards cleaned up a few spills. "You traveled quite a bit faster on your flights from Earth, and these trains can't jump the track."

The passengers divided their time between socializing, admiring the scenery and enjoying the civilized comforts of the Deimos Express. The dining/club cars did a brisk trade all evening. Eventually the passengers retired to their sleeper compartments.

Sunrise found the train gliding through a dune field which reminded Timothy Lo of Death Valley. Sand had been piled in wave patterns inside cracked obsidian craters. Then came low, raw hills. A reddish-brown plain. Volcanoes, some of them active. A trestle over a canyon cut by ancient water. The face of Mars was an unending entertainment.

The train slowed going through the towns, so the passengers could get a good look. They were all pretty much the same. A North Martian station, a UNSA Civic Center, an Adachi Company plant and a mall were surrounded by dozens of farm domes. Beyond them was a ring of new construction. Trucks, bicycles, and brightly marssuited pedestrians shared the streets.

"Most of the farmers are doing well," Timothy Lo told the media reps. "Immigrants are arriving in increasing numbers. Consortium members are already selling to this growing market, and Earth's consumer industries are establishing a beachhead. Banks are opening with capital to invest. I foresee a grand future for this new frontier."

He spent most of the trip tending to business. He consoled Director Obomi over the myriad problems caused by the UNSA's rapid expansion. Masa Kobiashi raised the subject of certain mineral deposits which could be profitably mined if North Martian would extend branch lines to them. A hotel operator was interested in building tourist meccas at Olympus Mons and the Equatorial Rift. All sorts of people were scenting a boom and wanted in. He encouraged them.

Shortly after three P.M. the Deimos Express arrived at Promontory.

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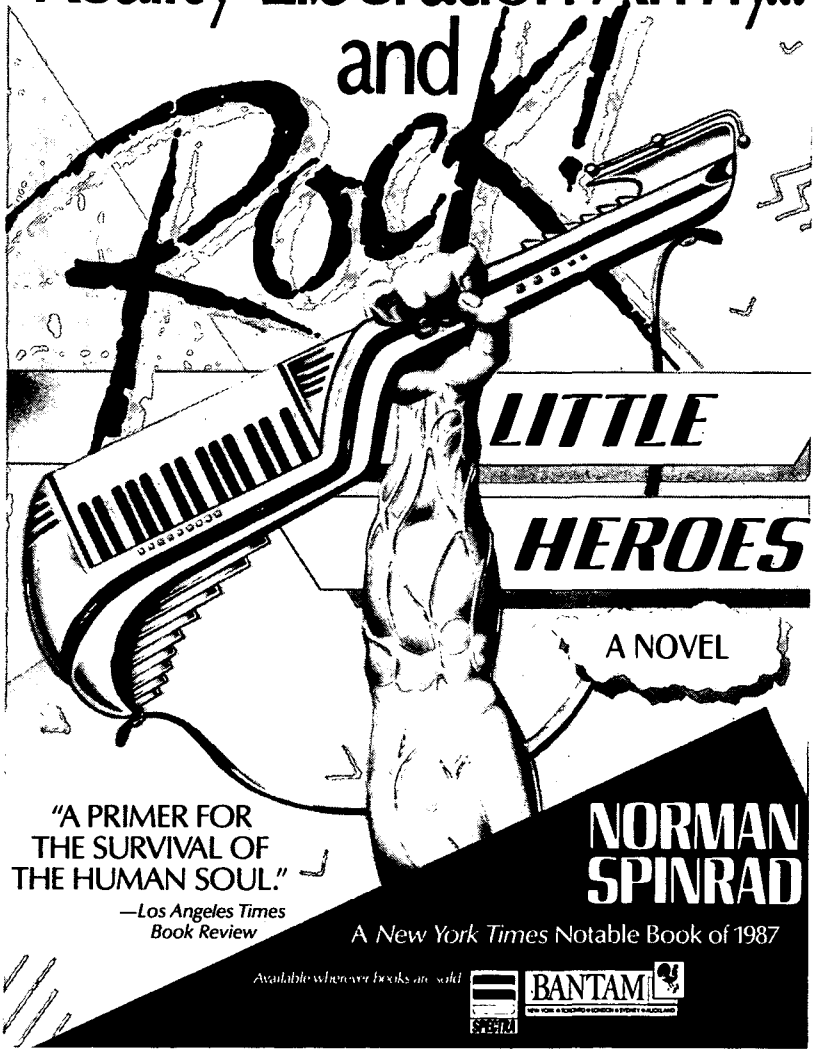

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"Promontory," Timothy Lo announced proudly, "is where the North Martian and Ulster-Mars lines meet. It's six hundred and forty-four kilometers *south* of the equator. It's also the only town without a Chinese or Irish name."

The train eased past the big North Martian station with its yard and maintenance sheds, and stopped at the center of town. A portable dome sat beside the tracks. Beyond it another train was parked on the northbound track, similar in design but wearing the Ulster-Mars logo.

It took awhile for the passengers to deboard through the front entry tube, but soon they were mingling under the dome with those from the Sidhe Express. When everyone was seated the ceremony began.

Timothy Lo sat on one side of the podium platform with North Martian's officers; opposite them were Michael Killeen and his key people—all of them Killeens. Ulster-Mars had the biggest family payroll on the planet.

Director Obomi made a reasonably brief welcoming speech, then drew his audience's attention to where the two lines came together. They had been linked and tested for weeks, but no train had yet crossed the intangible barrier. A North Martian and an Ulster-Mars worker stood on the track base. At Director Obomi's command one placed a superfluous gold-plated spike and the other sledgehammered it home.

When the applause died down there were more speeches. Then everyone drifted toward the bar and buffet, the chairs were removed, musicians took the platform, and the first annual Golden Spike Gala got underway.

As soon as he could slip away without being noticed, Timothy Lo went back to his private car. He sagged bonelessly in an observation deck seat, smoking a rare festive cigar and watching a meteor streak across the evening sky.

"A nice little train you have here, Mister Lo."

He swiveled the seat, and saw Michael Killeen standing by the stairway.

For several moments they looked at each other without speaking. Then Timothy Lo said, "Make yourself at home, Mister Killeen. The booze is to your left."

Michael Killeen poured himself a drink, and brought it over to the seat across from Timothy Lo. "The Rail Society meetings have been duller for your absence."

"Alas, being seen together would be bad for our arch-enemies image. Speaking of which . . ."

"Put your mind at ease. No one saw me come, and no one will see me go. Not that I'm really convinced we needed this fake race."

Timothy Lo admired the glowing tip of his cigar. "You have a charming innocence, old friend. Misdirection is the key ingredient in any great

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con. If the railroad could have been sold on its merits, it already would have been. Whereas a fight over something tends to increase its perceived value."

"Innocence, my assets!" Michael Killeen grumbled. "At any rate some self-congratulations are in order. Even if they figure out what we're doing, they can't back out now. They have too many chips on the table."

"We're over the hump," Timothy Lo agreed. "Now we have to nurture the boom so it doesn't go bust. Mars has the resources to support a population of millions, and it's going to. We'll lay a lot of track, develop a lot of land, and build our empires."

He looked at the lights of the town. Tonight they were just a handful huddled together in the middle of the empty darkness. But every night would see a few more, spreading out a bit farther. "It's like I said all along. What this planet needed was a railroad." ●

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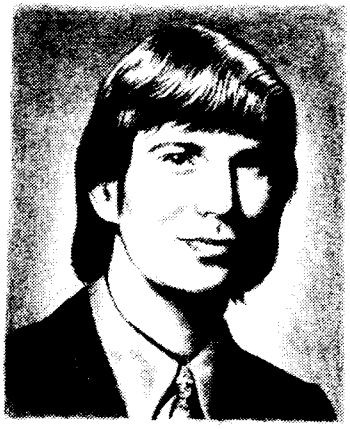
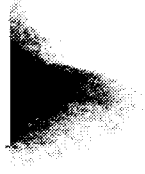
WANNA DANCE?



by Howard Waldrop

art: Bob Walters

Howard Waldrop's most recent collection of short stories, *All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past* (Ursus Books, 1987), has just been nominated for The Horror Writers of America's Bram Stoker Award. Mr. Waldrop tells us he is currently working on a novel, *I, John Mandeville*, and on a number of short stories and novelettes.



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The light was so bad in the bar that everyone there looked like they had been painted by Thomas Hart Benton, or carved from dirty bars of soap with rusty spoons.

"Frank! Frank!" the patrons yelled, like for Norm on *Cheers* before they canceled it.

"No need to stand," I said. I went to the table where Barb, Bob, and Penny sat. Carole the waitress brought over a Ballantine Ale in a can, no glass.

"How y'all?" I asked my three friends. I seemed *not* to have interrupted a conversation.

"I feel like six pounds of monkey shit," said Bob, who had once been tall and thin and was now tall and fat.

"My mother's at it again," said Penny. Her nails looked like they had been done by Mungo of Hollywood, her eyes were like pissholes in a snowbank.

"Jim went back to Angela," said Barb.

I stared down at the table with them for five or six minutes. The music over the speakers was "Wonderful World, Beautiful People" by Johnny Nash. We usually came to this bar because it had a good jukebox that livelied us up.

"So," said Barb, looking up at me, "I hear you're going to be a tour guide for the reunion."

There are terrible disasters in history, and there are always great catastrophes just waiting to happen.

But the greatest one of all, the thing time's been holding its breath for, the *capo de tutti capi* of impending disasters, was going to happen this coming weekend.

Like the *Titanic* steaming for its chunk of polar ice, like the *Hindenberg* looking for its Lakehurst, like the guy at Chernobyl wondering what *that* switch would do, it was inevitable, inexorable, a psychic juggernaut.

The Class of '69 was having its twentieth high school reunion.

And what they were coming back to was no longer even a high school—it had been phased out in a magnet school program in '74. The building had been taken over by the community college.

The most radical graduating class in the history of American secondary education, had, like all the ideals it once held, no real place to go.

Things were to start Saturday morning with a tour of the old building, then a picnic in the afternoon in the city park where everyone used to get stoned and lie around all weekend, then a dance that night in what used to be the fanciest downtown hotel a few blocks from the state capitol.

That was the reunion Barb was talking about.

* * *

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"I found the concept of the high school no longer being there so existential that I offered to help out," I said. "Olin Sweetwater called me a couple of months ago—"

"Olin Sweetwater? Olin *Sweetwater!*" said Penny. "Geez! I haven't heard that name in the whole damn twenty years." She held onto the table with both hands. "I think I'm having a drug flashback!"

"Yeah, Olin. Lives in Dallas now. Runs an insurance agency. He got my name from somebody I built some bookcases for a couple of years ago. Anyway, asked if I'd be one of the guides on the tour Saturday morning—you know, point out stuff to husbands and wives and kids, people who weren't there."

I didn't know if I should go on.

Bob was looking at me, waiting.

"Well, Olin got me in touch with Jamie Lee Johnson—Jamie Lee Something hyphen Something now, none of them Johnson. She's the entertainment chairman, in charge of the dance. I made a couple of tapes for her."

I don't have much, but I do have a huge bunch of Original Oldies, Greatest Hits albums and other garage sale wonders. Lots of people know it and call me once or twice a year to make dance tapes for their parties.

"Oh, you'll like this," I said, waving to Carole to bring me another Ballantine Ale. "She said 'Spring for some Maxell tapes, not the usual four for eighty-nine cents kind I hear you buy at Revco.' Where you think she could have heard about that?"

"From me," said Barb. "She called me a month ago, too." She smiled a little.

"Come on, Barb." I said. "Spill it."

"Well, I wanted to—"

"I'm not going," said Penny.

We all looked at her.

"Okay. Your protest has been noted and filed. Now start looking for your granny dress and your walnut shell beads." I said.

"Why should I go back?" said Penny. "High school was shit. None of *us* had any fun there, we were all toads. Sure, things got a little exciting, but you could have been on top of Mount Baldy in Colorado in the late '60s and it would have been exciting. Why should I go see a bunch of jerks making fools of themselves trying to recapture some, some *image* of themselves another whole time and place?"

"Oh," said Bob, readjusting his gimme hat, "You really should hang around jerks more often."

"And why's that, Bob?" asked Penny, peeling the label from her Lone Star.

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" 'Cause if you watch them long enough," said Bob, "you'll realize that jerks are capable of *anything*."

Bob's the kind of guy who holds people's destinies in his hands and they never realize it. When someone does something especially stupid and life-threatening in traffic, Bob doesn't honk his horn or scream or shake his fist.

He follows them. Either to where they're going, or the city limits, whichever comes first. If they go to work, or shopping, he makes his move then. If they go to a residence, he jots down the make, model and license plate of the car on a notepad he keeps on his dashboard, and comes back later that night.

Bob has two stacks of bumper stickers in the glove compartment of his truck. He takes one from each.

He goes to the vehicle of the person who has put his life personally in jeopardy, and he slaps one of the stickers on the left front bumper and one on the right rear.

The one on the back says SPICS AND NIGGERS OUT OF THE U.S.!

The one he puts on the front reads KILL A COP TODAY!

He goes through about fifty pairs of stickers a year. He's self-employed, so he writes the printing costs off on his Schedule A as "Depreciation."

Penny looked at Bob a little longer. "Okay. You've convinced me," she said. "Are you happy?"

"No," said Bob, turning in his chair. "Tell us whatever it is that'll make us happy, Barb."

"The guys are going to play."

Just *the guys*. No names. No *what guys?* We all knew. I had never before in my life seen Bob's jaw drop. Now I have.

The guys.

Craig Beausoliel. Morey Morkheim. Abram Cassuth. Andru Esposito. Or, taking them in order of their various band names from junior high on: Four Guys in a Dodge. Two Jews, A Wop, and A Frog. The Hurtz Bros. (Pervo, Devo, Sado, and Twisto). The Bug-Eyed Weasels. Those were when they were local, when they played Yud's, the Vulcan Gas Company, Tod's Hi-Spot. Then they got a record label and went national just after high school.

You knew them as *Distressed Flag Sale.*

That was the title of their first album (subtitled *For Sale Cheap One Country Inquire 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*). You probably knew it as the "blue-cake-with-the-white-stars-on-the-table-with-the-red-stripes-

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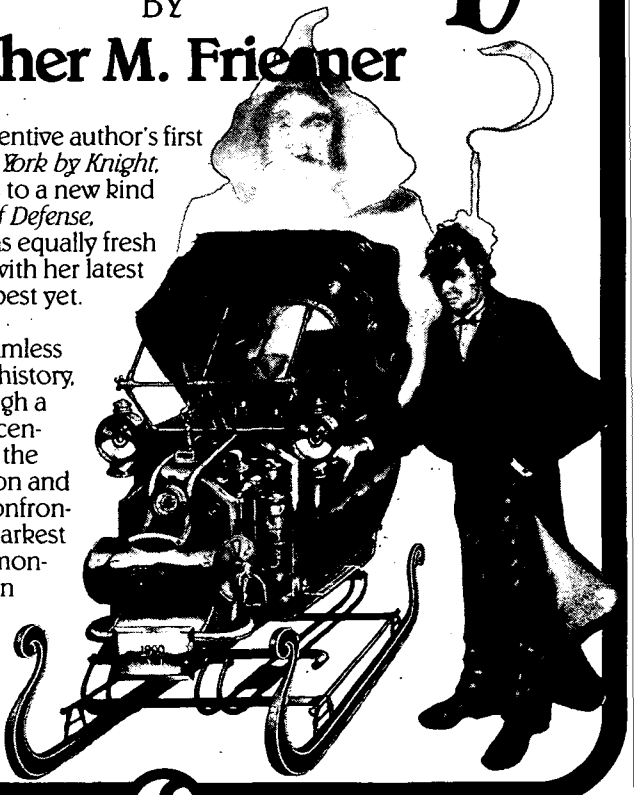

SIGNET FANTASY

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formed-on-the-white-floor-by-the-blood-running-in-seven-rivulets-from-the-dead-G.I." album.

Their second and last was *NEXT!* with the famous photo of the Saigon police chief blowing the brains out of the suspected VC in the checked shirt during the Tet Offensive of 1968, only over the general's face they'd substituted Nixon's, and over the VC's, Howdy Doody's.

Then of course came the seclusion for six months, then the famous concert/riot/bust in Miami in 1970 that put an end to the band pretty much as a functioning human organization.

Morey Morkhein tried a comeback after his time in the *jusgado*, in the mid-70s, as Moe in Moe and the Meanies' *Suck My Buttons*, but it wasn't a very good album and the times were *already* wrong.

"I can't believe it," said Penny. "None of them have played in what, fifteen years? They probably'll sound like shit."

"Well, I'll tell you what I know," said Barb. "Jamie Lee—Younts-Fulton is the name, Frank—said after his jail term and the try at the comeback, Morey threw it all over and moved down to Corpus where his aunt was in the hotel business or something, and he opened a souvenir shop, a whole bunch of 'em eventually, called Morey's Mementoes. Got pretty rich at it supposedly, though you can never tell, especially from Jamie Lee—I mean, anyone, *anyone* who'd take as part of her second married name a hyphenated name from her *first* husband that was later convicted of mail fraud just because Younts is more sophisticated than Johnson—Johnson Fulton sounds like an 1830 politician from Tennessee, know what I mean?—you just can't trust about things like who's rich and who's not. Anyway, Morey was at some convention for seashell brokers or something—Jamie says about half the shells and junk sold in Corpus come from Japan and Taiwan—he ran into Andru, of all people, who was in the freight business! Like, Morey had been getting shells from this shipping company for ten years and it turns out to belong to Andru's uncle or brother-in-law or something! So they start writing to each other, then somehow (maybe it was from Bridget, you remember Bridget? from UT? Yeah.) she knew where Abram was, and about that time the people putting all this reunion together got a hold of Andru. So the only thing left to do was find Craig."

She looked around. It was the longest I'd ever heard Barb talk in my life.

"You know where he was?"

"No. Where?" we all three said.

"Ever eat any Dr. Healthy's Nut-Crunch Bread?"

"A loaf a day," said Bob, patting his stomach.

"Craig is Dr. Healthy."

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"Shit!" said Bob. "Isn't that stuff baked in Georgetown?"

"Yeah. He's been like thirty miles away for fifteen years, baking bread and sweet rolls. Jamie said, like some modern-day Cactus Jack Garner, he vowed never to go south of the San Gabriel River again."

"But now he is?"

"Yep. Supposedly, Andru's gonna fly down to Morey's in Corpus this week and they're going to practice before they come up here. Abram always was the quickest study and the only real musical genius, so he'll be okay."

"That only leaves one question," said Penny, speaking for us all. "Can Craig still sing? Can Craig still *play?* I mean, look what happened after the Miami thing."

"Good question," said Bob. "I suppose we'll all find out in a big hurry Saturday night. Besides," he said, looking over at me, "we always got your tapes."

The name's Frank Bledsoe. I'm pushing forty, which is exercise enough.

I do lots of odd stuff for a living—a little woodwork and carpentry, mostly speakers and bookcases. I help people move a lot. In Austin, if you have a pickup, you have friends for life.

What I mostly do is build flyrods. I make two kinds—a 7′ one for a #5 line and an 8′2″ one for a #6 line. I get the fiberglass blanks from a place in Ohio, and the components like cork grips, reel seats, guides, tips and ferrules, from whoever's having a sale around the country.

I sell a few to a fishing tackle store downtown. The seven-footer retails for $22, the other for $27.50. Each rod takes about three hours of work, a day for the drying time on the varnish on the wraps. So you can see my hourly rate isn't too swell.

I live in a place about the size of your average bathroom in a real person's house. But it's quiet, it's on a cul-de-sac, and there's a converted horse stable out back I use for my workshop.

What keeps me in business is that people around the country order a few custom-made rods each year, for which I charge a little more.

Here's a dichotomy: as flyfishing becomes more popular, my business falls off.

That's because, like everything else in these post-modernist times, the Yups ruined it. As with every other recreation, they confuse the sport with the equipment.

Flyfishing is growing with them because it's a very status thing. When the Yups found it, all they wanted to do was be seen on the rivers and lakes with a six hundred-dollar split-bamboo rod, a pair of two hundred-dollar waders, a hundred-dollar vest, shirts with a million zippers on them, a seventy-five-dollar tweed hat, and a patch from a flyfishing

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school that showed they'd paid one thousand dollars to learn how to put out enough fly line to reach across the average K-Mart parking lot.

What I make is cheap fiberglass rods, not even boron or graphite. No glamor. And the real fact is that in flyfishing, most fish are caught within twenty feet of your boots. No glory there, either.

So the sport grows, and money comes in more and more slowly.

All this talk about the reunion has made me positively reflective. So let me put 1969 in perspective for you.

Richard Milhous Nixon was in his first year in office. He'd inherited all the good things from Lyndon Johnson—the social programs—and was dismantling them, and going ahead with all the bad ones, like the War in Nam. The Viet Cong and NVA were killing one hundred Americans a week, and according to the Pentagon, we were killing two thousand of them, regular as clockwork, as announced at the five P.M. press briefing in Saigon every Friday. The draft call was fifty thousand a month.

The Beatles released *Abbey Road* late in the year. At the end of the summer we graduated there was something called the Woodstock Festival of Peace and Music; in December there would be the disaster at the Altamont racetrack (in which, if you saw the movie that came out the next year, you could see a Hell's Angel with a knife kill a black man with a gun on camera while all around people were freaking out on bad acid and Mick Jagger, up there trying to sing, was saying "Brothers and sisters, why are we fighting each other?"). On the nights of August 8 and 9 were the Tate-LaBianca murders in L.A. (Charles Manson had said to his people "Kill everybody at Terry Melcher's house," not knowing Terry had moved. Terry Melcher was Doris Day's son. Chuck thought Terry owed him some money or had reneged on a recording deal or something. When he realized what he'd done, he had them go out and kill some total strangers to make the murders at the Tate household look like the work of a kill-the-rich cult.) On December 17, Tiny Tim married Miss Vickie on the *Tonight Show*, with Johnny Carson as best man.

The Weathermen, the Black Panthers and, according to agent's reports, "frizzy-haired women of a radical organization called NOW," were disturbing the increasingly senile sleep of J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI. He longed for the days when you could shoot criminals down in the streets like dogs and have them buried in handcuffs, when all the issues were clear-cut. Spirotis T. Agnew, the vice-president, was gearing up to make his "nattering nabobs of negativism" speech, and to coin the term Silent Majority. This was four years before he made the most moving and eloquent speech in his, life, which went: "*Nolo contendere.*"

We were reading Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or rereading *The Hobbit* for the zillionth time, or Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*. And

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on everybody's lips were the words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: That which does not kill us makes us stronger. (Nixon was working on that, too.)

There were weeks when you thought nothing was ever going to change, there was no wonderment anymore, just new horrors about the War, government repression, drugs. (They were handing out life sentences for the possession of a single joint in some places that year.)

Then, in three days, from three total strangers, you'd hear the Alaska vacation—flannel shirt—last man killed by an active volcano story, all the people *swearing* they'd heard the story from the kid in the flannel shirt himself, and you'd say, yeah, the world is *still* magic . . .

I'll really put 1969 in a nutshell for you. There are six of you sharing a three-bedroom house that fall, and you're splitting rent you think is exorbitant, $89.75 a month. Minimum wage was $1.35 an hour, and none of you even has any of *that*.

Somebody gets some money from somewhere, God knows, and you're all going to pile into the VW Microbus which is painted green, orange, and fuchsia, and going to the H.E.B. to score some food. But first, since there are usually hassles, you all decide to smoke all the grass in the house, about three lids' worth.

When you get to the store you split up to get food, and are to meet at checkout lane Number Three in twenty minutes. An hour later you pool the five shopping carts and here's what you have:

Seven two-pound bags of lemon drops. Three bags of orange marshmallow goobers. A Hostess Ding-Dong assortment pack. A twelve-pound bag of Kokuho Rose New Variety Rice. A two-pound can of Beer-Nuts. A fifty-foot length of black shoestring licorice. Three six-packs of Barq's Root Beer. Two quarts of fresh strawberries and a pint of Half and Half. A Kellog's Snak-Pak (heavy on the Frosted Flakes). A five-pound bag of turbinado sugar. Two one-pound bags of Bazooka Joe bubble gum (with double comics). A blue 75-watt light bulb.

It fills up three dubl/bags and the bill comes to $8.39, the last seventy-four cents of which you pay the clerk in pennies.

Later, when somebody finally cooks, everybody yells, "Shit! Rice again? Didn't we just go to the grocery store?"

PS: On July 20 that year we landed on the Moon.

Now I'll tell you about this year, 1989.

The Republicans are in the tenth month of their new Presidency, naturally. After Cuomo and Iacocca refused to run, the Democrats, like always, ran two old warhorses who quit thinking along about 1962. ("If nominated, I refuse to run," said Iacocca, "if elected, I refuse to serve. And that's a promise.")

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We have six thousand military advisors in Honduras and Costa Rica. All those guys who went down to the post office and signed their Selective Service postcards are beginning to look a little grey around the gills.

There are 1,800,000 cases of AIDS in America, and 120,000 have died of it.

On Wall Street the Dow Jones just passed the 3000 mark after its near-suicide in '87. "Things are looking just great!" says the new president.

Congress is voting on the new two trillion dollar debt ceiling limit.

Things are much like they have been forever. The rich are richer, the poor poorer, the middle class has no choices. The cities are taxing them to death, the suburbs can't hold them. Every state but those in the Bible-belt South has horse *and* dog racing, a lottery, legalized pari-mutuel Bingo *and* a state income tax, and they're still going broke.

Everything is wrong everywhere. The only good thing I've noticed is that MTV is off the air.

You go to the grocery store and get a pound of bananas, a six foot electric extension cord, a can of powder scent air freshener, a tube of store-brand toothpaste and a loaf of bread. It fits in the smallest plastic sack they have and costs $7.82.

Let me put 1989 in another nutshell for you:

A friend of mine keeps his record albums (his CDs are elsewhere) in what looks like a haphazard stack of orange crates in one corner of his living room.

They're not orange crates. What he did was get a sculptor friend of his to make them. He got some lengths of stainless steel, welded and shaped them to look like a haphazard stack of crates. Then with punches and chisels and embossing tools the sculptor made the metal look like grained unseasoned wood, and then painted them, labels and all, to look like crates.

You can't tell them from the real things, and my friend only paid three thousand dollars for them.

Or to put it another way: And Zarathustra came down from the hills unto the cities of men. And Zarathustra spake unto them, and what he said to them was: "Yo!"

PS: Nobody's been to the Moon in sixteen years.

MY TRIP TO THE POST OFFICE by FRANK BLEDSOE AGE 38

I'd finished three rods for a guy in Colorado the day before. I put the clothes back on I'd worn working on them, all dotted with varnish. I was building a bookcase, too, so I hit it a few licks with a block plane to get my blood going in the early morning.

It was a nice crisp fall day, so I decided to ride my bike to the post office substation to mail the rods. I was probably so covered with wood

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shavings I looked like a Cabbage Patch Kid that had been hit with a slug from a .45.

I brushed myself off, put the rods in their cloth bags, put the bags in the tubes with the packing paper, and put the tubes in the carrier I have on the bike. Then I rode off to the branch post office.

I'm coming out of the substation with the postage and insurance receipts in my hand when I hear a lot of brakes squealing and horns honking.

A lady in a white Volvo has managed to get past two One Way Do Not Enter signs at the exit to the parking lot and is coming in against the traffic, and all the angles of the diagonal parking places. She has a look of calm imperturbability on her face.

Nobody's looking for a car from her direction. As they back out, suddenly there she is in the rear-view mirror. They slam on their brakes and honk and yell.

"Asshole!" yells a guy who's killed his engine in a panic stop. She gets to the entrance of the lot, does a 290 degree turn, and pulls into the Reserved Handicapped spot at the front door, acing out the one-armed guy with Disabled American Vets license plates who was waiting for the guy who was illegally parked against the yellow curbing in the entrance to move so he could get in.

She gets out of the car. She's wearing a silk blouse, a set of June Cleaver double-strand pearls and matching earrings, and a pair of those shorts that make the wearer look like they have a refrigerator stuffed down the back of them.

"Are you handicapped?" I ask.

She looks right through me. She's taking a yellow Attempt to Deliver slip out of her sharkskin purse. She has on shades.

"I said, are you handicapped? I don't see a sticker on your car."

"What business is it of yours?" she asks. "Besides, I'm only going to be in there a minute."

That's what you think. She goes inside. I shrug at the one-armed guy. With some people it was their own fault they went to Korea or Viet Nam and got their legs and stuff blown off, with others it wasn't.

He drives off down the packed lot. He probably won't find a space for a block.

I take my bike tools out of my pocket. I go to the Volvo. In deference to Bob, I undo the valve cores on the left front and right rear tires.

Then I get on my bike and ride down to the pay phone at the bakery three blocks away, call the non-emergency police number, and tell them there's a lady without a handicap sticker blocking the reserved spot at the post office substation.

After mailing the rods and using the quarter for the phone, I have

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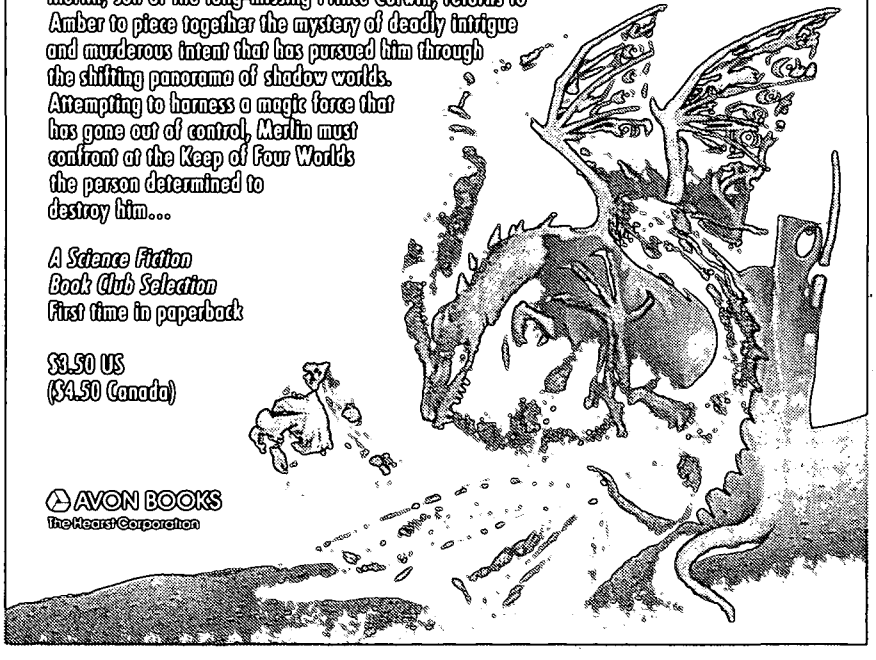

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eighty-two cents left—just enough for coffee at the bakery. It's a chi-chi place I usually never go to, but I haven't had any coffee this morning and I know they make a cup of Brazilian stuff that would bring Dwight D. Eisenhower back to life.

I go in. They've got one of those European doorchimes that sets poor people's nerves on edge and lets those with a heavy wallet know they're in a place where they can really drop a chunk of money.

The clerk is Indian or Paki; he's on the phone talking to someone. I start tapping my change on the counter looking around. Maybe ten people in the place. He hangs up and starts toward me.

"Large cuppa—" I start to say.

The chime jingles and the smell hits me at the same time as their voices; a mixture of Jovan Musk for Men and Sassoon styling mousse.

"—game." says a voice. "How many croissants you still got?" says the voice over my shoulder to the clerk.

The counterman has one hand on the coffee spigot and a sixteen ounce styrofoam cup in the other.

"Oh, very many, I think," he says to the voice behind me.

"Give us about—oh, what, John?—say, twenty-five assorted fruit-filled, no lemon, okay?"

The clerk starts to put down the styrofoam cup. In ambiguous situations, people always move toward the voice that sounds most like money.

"My coffee?" I say.

The clerk looks back and forth like he's just been dropped on the planet.

"Could you sort of hurry?" says the voice behind me. "We're double-parked."

I turn around then. There are three of them in warmup outfits—gold and green, blue and orange, blue and silver. They look maybe twenty-five. Sure enough, there's a blue Renault blocking three cars parked at the laundromat next door. The handles of squash racquets stick up out of the blue and orange, blue and silver, gold and green duffles in the back seat.

"No lemon," says the blond-haired guy on the left. "Make sure there's no lemon, huh?"

"You gonna fill our order?" asks the first guy, who looks like he was raised in a meatloaf mold.

"No," I say. "First he's going to get my coffee, then he'll get your order."

They notice me for the first time then, suspicion dawning on them this wasn't covered in their Executive Assertiveness Training program.

The clerk is turning his head back and forth like a radar antenna.

"I thought they gave *free* coffee at the Salvation Army," says the blond guy, looking me up and down.

"*Tres, tres amusant.*" I said.

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"Are you going to fill our $35 order, or are you going to give him his big fifty cent cup of coffee?" asked the first guy.

The ten other people in the place were all frozen in whatever attitude they had been in when all this started. One woman actually had a donut halfway to her mouth and was watching, her eyes growing wider.

"My big seventy-five cent order," I said, letting the change clink on the glass countertop. "Any time you come in *any* place," I went on, "you should look around the room and you should ask yourself, who's the only, *only* possible one here who could have taken Taiwanese mercenaries into Laos in 1968? And you should act accordingly."

"Who the fuck do you think *you* are?" asked the middle one, who hadn't spoken before and looked like he'd taken tai-kwon-do since he was four.

"Practically nobody," I said. "But if any of you say *one more word* before I get my coffee, I'm going out to the saddlebag on my bike, and I'm going to take out a product backed by 132 years of Connecticut Yankee know-how and fine American craftsmanship and I'm coming back in here and showing you *exactly* how the rat chews the cheese."

Then I gave them the Thousand Yard Stare, focusing on something about a half mile past the left shoulder of the guy in the middle.

They backed up, jangling the doorbell, out onto the sidewalk, bumping into a lady coming out with a load of wash.

"Crazy fuck," I heard one of them say as he climbed into the car. The tai-kwon-do guy kept looking at me as the driver cranked the car up. He said something to him, jumped around the car and started kicking the shit out of the back tire of the twelve-speed white Concord leaning against the telephone pole out front.

I heard people sucking in their breaths in the bakery.

The guy kicked the bike three times, watching me, breaking out the spokes in a half moon, laughing.

"My bike!" yelled a woman on one of the stools. "That's my bike! You assholes! Get their license number!" She ran outside.

I turned to the clerk, who had my cup of coffee ready. I plunked down eighty cents in nickels, dimes and pennies, and put two cents in the TIPS cup. Then I put saccharine and cream in the coffee.

Out on the sidewalk, the woman was screaming at the tai-kwon-do-looking guy, and she was crying. His two friends were talking to him in low voices and reaching for their billfolds. He looked like a little kid who'd broken a window in a sandlot ball game. People had come out of the grocery store across the street and were watching.

I got on my bike and rode to the corner unnoticed.

A cop car, lights flashing but with the siren off, turned toward the bakery as I turned out onto the street.

It was only 9:15 A.M. It was looking to be a nice day.

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* * *

I got two-and-three-fourths stars in the 1977 *Career Woman's Guide to Austin Men*. Here's the entry: Working-class bozo, well-read. Great for a rainy Tuesday night when your regular feller is out of town. PS: You'll have to pick up all the tabs.

I'm still friends with about two-thirds of the women I've ever gone with, which I'm as proud of as anything else in my life, I guess. I care a lot, I'm fairly intelligent, and I have a sense of humor. You know, the doormat personality.

At one time, in those days before herpes and AIDS, when everybody was trying to figure out just who and what they were, I was sort of a Last Station of the Way for women who, in Bob's words, "were trying to decide whether to go nelly or not." They usually did anyway, more often than not with another old girlfriend of mine.

(It all started when I was dating the ex-wife of the guy who was then living with my ex-girlfriend. The lady who was then the ex-wife now lives with a nice lady who used to be married to another friend of mine. They each have tattoos on their left shoulders. One of them has a portrait of Karl Marx and under it the words *Hot to Trotsky*.

The other has the Harley-Davidson symbol but instead of the usual legend it says *Born to Read Hegel*.)

No one set out an agenda or anything for me to be their Last Guy on Earth. It just happened, and expanded outward like ripples in a pond.

About two months ago at a party some young kid was listening to a bunch of us old farts talk, and he asked me, "If the Sixties were so great, and the Eighties suck so bad, then what happened in the Seventies?"

"Well," I said. "Richard Nixon resigned, and then, and then . . . gee, I don't know."

Another woman I dated for a while had only one goal in life: to plant the red flag on the rubble of several prominent landmarks between Virginia and Maryland.

We used to be coming home from the dollar midnight flicks on campus (*Our Daily Bread, Sweet Movie, China Is Near*) and we would pass this neat old four-story hundred-year-old house, and every time, she would look up at it and say "That's where I'm going to live after the Revolution."

I'm talking 1976 here, folks.

We'd gone out together five or six times, and we went back to her place and were going to bed together for the first time. We were necking, and she got up to go to the bathroom. "Get undressed," she said.

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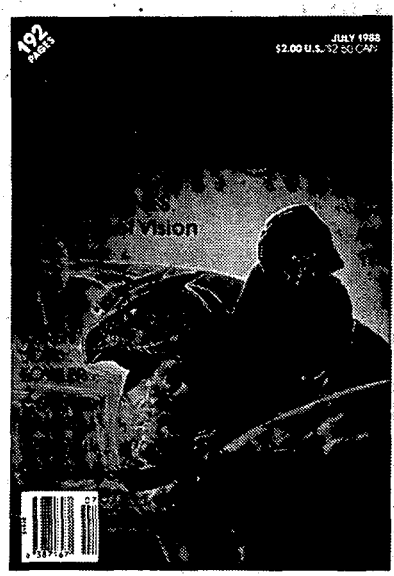

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When she came back in, taking her sweater off over her head, I was naked in the bed with the sheets pulled up to my neck. I was wearing a Mao Tse Tung mask.

It was *wonderful.*

Friday. Reunion Eve.

It was one of those days when everything is wrong. All the work I started I messed up in some particularly stupid way. I started everything over twice. I gave up at three P.M.

Things didn't get any better. I tried TV. A blur of talking heads. Nothing interested me for more than thirty seconds.

Outside the sun was setting past Mt. Bonnell and Lake Austin. Over on Cat Mountain the red winks of the lights on the TV towers came on. A Continental 737 went over, heading towards California's golden climes.

I put on a music tape I'd made and tried to read a book. I got up and turned the noise off. It was too Sixties. I'd hear enough of that tomorrow night. No use setting myself up for a wallow in the good times and peaking too early. I drank a beer that tasted like kerosene. It was going to be a cool clear October night. I closed the windows and watched the moon come up over Manor, Texas.

The book was Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel.* I tried to read it some more and it began to go *yammer yammer yibble yibble* Twain, *yammer yibble* Hemingway. Enough.

I turned the music back on, put on the headphones and lay down on the only rug in the house, looking up at the cracks in the plaster and listening to the Moody Blues. What a loss of a day, but I was tired anyway. I went to bed at nine P.M.

It was one of those nights when every change in the wind brings an erection, when every time you close your eyes you see penises and vulvas, a lot of them ones you haven't seen before. After staring up at the ceiling for an hour, I got up, got another beer, went into the living room and sat naked in the dark.

I had one of those feelings like I hadn't had in years. The kind your aunt told you she'd had the day your grandfather died, before anybody knew it yet. She told you at the funeral that three days before she'd felt wrong and irritable all day and didn't know why, until the phone rang with the news. The kind of feeling Phil Collins gets on "In the Air Tonight," a mood that builds and builds with no discernible cause.

It was a feeling like in a Raymond Chandler novel, the kind he blames on the Santa Ana winds, when all the dogs bark, when people get pissed off for no reason, when yelling at someone you love is easier than going on silently with the mood you have inside.

Only there were no howling dogs, no sound of fights from next door.

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Maybe it was just me. Maybe this reunion thing was getting to me more than I wanted it to.

Maybe it was just horniness. I went to the VCR, an old Beta II, second one they ever made, no scan, no timer, all metal, weighs 150 pounds, bought at Big State Pawn for fifty bucks, sometimes works and sometimes doesn't. I put in *Cum Shot Revue #1* and settled back in my favorite easy chair.

The TV going *kskkssssssssss* woke me up at 4:32 A.M. I turned everything off. So this is what me and my whole generation come down to, people sleeping naked in front of their TVs with empty beer cans in their laps. It was too depressing to think about.

I made my way to bed, lay down, and had dreams. I don't remember anything about them, except that I didn't like them.

I've known three women the latter part of the twentieth century has driven slapdab crazy.

For one, it was through no fault of her own. Certain chemicals were missing in her body. She broke up with me quietly after six months and checked herself into the MHMR. That was the last time I saw her.

She evidently came back through town about three years ago, *after* she quit taking her lithium. I got strange phone calls from old friends who had seen her. Her vision, and that of the one we call reality, no longer intersected. Having destroyed her present, she had begun to work on the past and the future also.

Last I heard she had run off with a cook she met at a Halfway House; they were rumored to be working Exxon barges together on the Mississippi River.

The second, after affairs with five real jerks in a row in six months, began to lose weight. She'd only been 111 pounds to begin with. People whispered about leukemia, cancer, some wasting disease. Of course it wasn't—in the rest of the world, dying by not getting enough to eat is a right, in America, it's a privilege. She began to look like sticks held together with a pair of kid's blue-jeans and a shirt, with only two brightly-glowing eyes watching you from the head to show she was still alive. She was fainting a lot by then.

One day Bob, who had been her lover six years before, went over to her house. (By then she was forgetting to do things like close and lock the doors, or turn on the lights at night.)

Bob picked her up by her shirt collar (it was easy, she only weighed eighty-three pounds by then) and slapped her, like in the movies, five times as hard as he could.

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It was only on the fifth slap that her eyes came to life and filled with fear.

"Stop it, Gabriella," said Bob. "You're killing yourself." Then he kissed her on her bloody, swelling lips, set her down blinking, and walked out her door and her life, and hasn't seen her since.

He saved her. She met another nice woman at the eating disorder clinic. They now live in Westlake Hills, raising the other woman's two boys by her first marriage.

The third one's cat ran away one morning. She went back upstairs, wrote a long apologetic note to her mother, dialed 911 and told them where she was, hung up and drank most of an eleven-ounce can of Crystal Drano.

She lived on for six days in the hospital in a coma with no insides and a raging 107° fever.

Her friends kept checking, but the cat never came back.

"Yo!" said Olin Sweetwater. He and two or three others were standing outside the community college on the cool Saturday morning. He had on a sweatshirt, done up in the old school colors, that said Bull Goose Tour Guide. We shook hands (thumbs locked, sawing our arms back and forth). He was balding; what hair he had left had a white plume across the left side.

The two women, Angela Pardo and Rita Jones when I'd known them, were nervous. Olin handed us sweatshirts that said Tour Guide. We thanked him.

I looked at the brick facade. The school had been an ugly dump in 1969; it was still a dump, but with a charm all its own.

(One of the reasons Olin asked me to help with the tour is that I'd lived with a lady artist for a year who had worked part-time as a clerk in the admissions office of the community college. I guess he thought that qualified me as an Expert.)

The tours were supposed to start at ten A.M. Sleepy college students who had Saturday labs were wandering in and out of the two-and-a-half story building or some of the other outbuildings the college leased. Olin had pulled lots of strings to let us guide people without any interference, or so he kept telling us.

Around 9:45 people started wandering up, trailing kids, shy husbands, wives, lovers. God, I thought recognizing a few here and there. We're so fucking normal looking. We look like our mothers and fathers did in 1969.

(Remember in 1973 when you saw *American Graffiti* for the first time and everybody laughed at the short haircuts and long skirts, then when

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you went back to see it in 1981 those parts didn't seem so strange anymore?)

I was talking to one of the few women who'd been nice to me in high school, a quiet girl named Sharon, whose front teeth then had reminded me, sweetly and not at all unpleasantly, of Rocket J. Squirrel's. She was now, I learned, on her second divorce. She introduced me to her kids—Seth and Jason—who looked like they'd rather be on Mars than here.

Sharon stopped talking and stared behind me. I saw other people turning and followed their gaze toward the street. "Jesus," I said. A pink flowered VW Beetle pulled up to the curb as a student drove away. Out of it came something from Mr. Natural—the guy had hair down to his butthole (a wig, it turned out), headband, walnut shell beads, elephant bell pants with neon green flash panels, a khaki shirt and wool vest, Ben Franklin specs tinted Vick's Salve blue. There was a B-52 peace symbol button big as a dinner plate on his left abdomen, and the vest had a leather stash pocket at the bottom snaps.

Something in the way he moves . . .

Seth and Jason were pointing and laughing, other people were looking embarrassed.

"Peace, Love, and Brotherhood," he said, flashing us the peace sign.

The voice. I knew it after twenty years. Hoyt Lawton.

Hoyt Lawton had been president of the fucking Key Club in 1969! He'd worn three-piece suits to school even on the days when he didn't *have* to go eat with the Rotarians! His hair was never more than three-eighths of an inch off his skull—we said he never got it cut, it just never grew. He won a bunch of money from something like the DAR for a speech he made at a Young Republicans convention on how all hippies needed was a good stiff tour of duty in Vietnam that would show them what America was all about. Hoyt Lawton, what an asshole!

And yet, there he was, the only one with enough *chutzpah* to show up like we were all supposed to feel. Okay, I'm older and more tolerant now. Hoyt, you're still an asshole, but with a little style.

By about 10:10 there were a hundred people there. Excluding husbands, wives, Significant Others and kids, maybe sixty of the Class of '69 had taken the trouble to show up.

Olin divided us up so we wouldn't run into each other. I started my group of twenty or so (Hoyt was in Olin's group thank god) on the second floor. We climbed the stairs.

"You'll notice they have air conditioning now?" I said. There were laughs. Austin hits ninety-five by April 20 most years. We'd sweltered through Septembers and died in Mays here, to the hum of ineffectual

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floor fans. The ceilings were twenty feet high and the ceiling fans might as well have been heat pumps.

"How many of you spent most of the last semester here?" I said, pointing. Two or three held up their hands. "This used to be the principal's office; now it's the copy center. Over there was Mr. Dix's office itself." Lots of people laughed then, probably hadn't thought of the carrot-headed principal since graduation day. He'd had it bad enough before someone heard him referred to as "Red" by the Superintendent of Schools one day.

"That used to be the only office that was air-conditioned, remember? At least you could get cool while waiting to be yelled at." I pointed to the air-conditioning vents.

That there air duct I didn't say *is the one that Morey Morkheim got into and took a big dump in one night after they'd expelled him one of those times.* Only in America is the penalty for skipping school expulsion for three days.

Mr. Dix had yelled at him after the absence, "What are you going to do with your life? You'll never amount to anything without an education!"

In seven months Morey was pulling in more money in a weekend than Dix would make in ten years—legally, too.

We moved through the halls, getting curious stares from students in classrooms with closed glass doors.

"Down here was where the student newspaper office was. Over there was the library, which the community college is using as a library." We went down to the first floor.

"Ah, the cafeteria!" It was now the study room, full of chairs and tables and vending machines. "Remember tomato surprise! Remember macaroni and cheese!" "Fish lumps on Friday!" said someone.

Half the student body in those days had come from the parochial junior highs around town. In 1969, parochial was the way you spelled Catholic. Nobody in the school administration ever read a paper, evidently, so they hadn't learned that the Pope had done away with "going to hell on a meat rap" back in 1964. So you still had fish lumps on Friday when we were there. The only good thing about having all those Catholic kids there was that we got to hear their jokes for the first time, like what's God's phone number? ETcumspiri 220!

"Down there, way off to the left," I said "was the band hall. You remember Mr. Stoat?" There were groans. "I thought so. Only musician I ever met who had *absolutely* no sense of rhythm."

Ah, the band hall. Where one morning a bunch of guys locked themselves in just before graduation, wired the intercom up to broadcast all over school, and played "Louie, Louie" on tubas, instead of the National Anthem, during home room period. It was too close to the end of school to expel them, so they didn't let them come to the commencement ex-

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ercise. In protest of which, when they played "Pomp and Circumstance," about three hundred of us Did the Freddy down the aisles of the municipal auditorium in our graduation gowns.

We passed a door leading to the boiler room, where all the teachers popped in for a smoke between classes, it being forbidden for them to take a puff anywhere on school grounds but in the Teachers' Lounge during their off-hour.

I stopped and opened it—sure enough, it was there, dimmed by twenty years and several attempts to paint over it, but in the remains of smudged-over day-glo orange paint on the top inside of the door it still said: *Ginny and Ray's Motel.*

Ginny Balducci and Ray Petro had come to school one morning ripped on acid and had wandered down to the boiler room and had taken their clothes off. My theory is that it was warm and nice and they wanted to feel the totality of the sensuous space. The school's theory, after they were interrupted by Coach Smetters, was that they had been Fornicating During Home Room Period, and without hall passes, too!

After Ginny came down, and while her father was screaming at Ray's parents across Dix's desk, she said to her father, "Leave them alone. They didn't have *their* clothes off!"

"Young lady," said Dix. "You don't seem to realize what serious trouble you're in."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ginny, looking the principal square in the eye, "Castrate me?"

I answered some questions about the fire escape that used to be on the south side of the building. "They fell on a community college student one day four years ago," I said. "Good thing we never *had* to use them." We were outside again.

"Over there was the gym. World's worst dance floor, second worst basketball court. Enough sweat was spilled there over the years to float the *Big Mo*. We can't go in, though, they now use it to store visual aids for the Parks and Rec department."

There was the morning when Dix had us all go to the gym for Assembly. His purpose, it went on to appear after he had talked for ten minutes, was to try to explain why the Armed Forces recruiters would be there on Career Day, along with the realtors and college reps and Rotarians who would come to tell you about the wonders of their profession in the Great Big World Out There. (Some nasty posters had appeared on every bare inch of wall in the building that morning questioning not only their presence on Career Day but also their continuing existence on the third rock from the sun.)

He was going on about how they had been there, draft or no draft, war or no war, every Career Day when a small sound started at the back of

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the ranked bleachers. The sound of two stiffened index fingers drumming slowly but very deliberately dum-dum-thump dum-dum-thump. Then a few other sets of fingers joined in *dum-dum-thumb dum-dum-thump*, at first background, then rising, louder and more insistent, then feet took it up, and it spread from section to section, while the teachers looked around wildly Dum-Dum-Thump Dum-Dum-Thump.

Dix stopped in mid-sentence, mouth open, while the sound grew. He saw half the student body—the other half was silent, or like the jocks led by Hoyt Lawton, beginning to boo and hiss—rise to its feet clapping its hands and stamping its feet in time—

DUM DUM THUMP DUM DUM THUMP

He yelled at people and pointed, then he quit and his shoulders sagged. And on a hidden passed signal, everybody quit on the same beat and it was deathly silent in the gym. Then everybody sat back down.

I think Dix had seen the future that morning—Kent State, the Cambodian incursion, the cease fire, the end of Nixon, the fall of Saigon.

He dismissed us. The recruiters were there on Career Day anyway.

I'd almost finished my tour. "One more place, not on the official stops," I said. I took them across the side street and down half a block.

"Ow wow!" said someone halfway there. "The Grindstone!"

We got there. It was a one-story place with real glass bricks across the whole front that would cost $80 a pop these days. The place was full of tools and cars.

"Oh, gee," said the people.

"It's now the Skill Shop," I said. "Went out of business in 1974, bought up by the city, leased by the community college."

Ah, the Grindstone! A real old-fashioned cafe/soda fountain. You were forbidden on pain of death to leave the school grounds except at lunch, so three thousand people tried to get in every day between 11:30 and 12:30.

One noon the place was packed. There was the usual riot going on over at UT ten blocks away. All morning you could hear sirens and dull *whoomps* as the increasingly senile police commissioner, who had been in office for thirty-four years, tried dealing with the increasingly complex late twentieth century. *Why, the children have gone mad* he once said in a TV interview.

Anyway, we were all stuffing our faces in the Grindstone when this guy comes running in the front door and out the back at two-hundred miles an hour. Somebody made the obvious stoned joke—"Man, I thought he'd *never* leave!"—and then a patrol car slammed up to the curb, and a cop jumped out. You could see his mind work.

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A. Rioter runs into the Grindstone. B. Grindstone is full of people. Therefore: C. Grindstone is full of rioters.

He opened the door, fired a tear-gas grenade right at the lunch counter, turned, got in his car and drove away.

People were barfing and gagging all over the place. There were screams, tears, rage. The Grindstone was closed for a week so they could rent some industrial fans and air it out. The city refused to pick up the tab. "The officer was in hot pursuit," said the police commissioner, "and acted within the confines of departmental guidelines." Case closed.

"Ah, the Grindstone," I said to the tour group. "What a *nice* place." A wave of nostalgia swept over me. "Today, shakes and fries. Tomorrow, a lube job and tune-up."

I was so filled with *mono no aware* that I skipped the picnic that afternoon.

The Wolfskill Hotel! Scene of a thousand-and-one nights' entertainments and more senior proms than there are fire ants in all the fields in Texas.

A friend of mine named Karen once said people were divided into two classes: those who went to their senior proms and went on to live fairly normal lives, and those who didn't, who became perverts, mass murderers or romance novelists.

If you were a guy you got maybe your first blow job after the prom, or if a girl a quick boff in the back seat of some immemorial Dodge convertible out at Lake Travis. The hotel meant excitement, adventure, magic.

I hadn't gone to my senior prom. A lot of us hadn't, looking on it as one more corrupt way to suck money from the working classes so that orchids could die all over the vast American night.

There were some street singers outside the hotel, playing jug band music without a jug—two guitars, a flute, tambourine and harmonica. They were fairly quiet. The cops wouldn't hassle them until after eleven P.M. They were pretty good. I dropped a quarter into their cigar box.

You could hear the strains of the Byrds' "Turn! Turn! Turn!" before you got through the lobby. The entertainment committee must have dropped a ton o' bucks on this—they had a bulletin board out front just past the registration table with everybody's pictures from the yearbook blown up, six to a sheet.

It was weird seeing all those people's names and faces—the beginnings of mustaches and beards on the guys, we'd fought tooth and nail for facial hair—long straight hair on the women—names that hadn't been used, or gone back to three or four times, in the last twenty years.

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I paid my $10.00 fee (like in the old days. Dance Tonight! Guys fifty cents Girls Free!).

Inside the ballroom people were already dancing, maybe a hundred, with that many more standing around talking and laughing in knots and clumps, being polite to each other, sizing up what Time's Heedless Claws had done to each other's bodies and outlooks.

Bob and Penny were already there. He was in a bluejean jacket and pants and wore a clear plastic tie. Penny was stunning, in a green velour thing, beautiful as she always is early in the evenings, before alcohol turns her into a person I don't know.

I was real spiffed out, for me: a nice sport coat, black slacks, a red silk tie with painted roses wide as the racing stripe on a Corvette.

There were people there in $500 gowns, $300 suits, tuxes, jeans, coveralls. Several were in period costumes; Hoyt had on another, much better than this morning's nightmare, but still what I describe as Early Neil Young. He was, of course, with a slim blonde who had once been a Houston cheerleader, I'm sure.

I saw some faculty members there. They had all been invited, of course. Ten or so, with their husbands or wives, had come. Even Mr. Stoat was there. It hit me as I looked at them that most of them had been in their twenties and thirties when they were trying to deal with us on a daily basis, much younger than we were now. God, what a thankless job they must have had—going off every day like going back up to the Front in WWI, trying to teach kids who viewed you as The Enemy, following along behind everything you did with the efficient erasers in their minds! Maybe I'm getting too mellow—they had it easier with us than teachers do now—at least most of us *could* read, and music was more important than TV to us. Later, I told myself, I'll go over and talk to Ms. Nugent who was always my favorite and who had been a good teacher in spite of the chaos around her.

There were two guys working the tapes and CDs up on the raised stage. I didn't recognize the order of the songs so knew they weren't playing one of my tapes. On the front part of the stage were a guitar and bass, a drum set and keyboards.

So it was true, and seemed the main topic of conversation, although as I passed one bunch of people I heard someone say "Those assholes? Them?"

Barb showed up, without a date, of course. She took my hand and led me toward the dance floor. "Let's dance until our shoulders bleed," she said.

"Yes, ma'am!" I said.

I don't know about you, but I've been hypnotized on dance floors before.

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Sometimes it seems as if the tune stretches out to accommodate how long and hard you want to dance, or think you can. The guys working the decks were switching back and forth between two cassette players and the music never stopped—occasionally songs *only* I could have recorded showed up. I didn't care. I was dancing.

(I've seen some strange things on dance floors in my life—the strangest was people forming a conga line to a song by the band Reptilikus called "After Today, You Got One Less Day To Live.")

"Ginny's here," I said to Barb. Barb looked over toward the door where Ginny Balducci's wheelchair had rolled in. One weekend in 1973 Ginny had gone off for a ski weekend with an intern, and had come back out of the hospital six months later with a whole different life. "I'll say hi in a minute." said Barb.

We danced to the only Dylan song you can dance to, "I Want You," "Back in the U.S.S.R.," Buffalo Springfield, Blue Cheer, Sam and Dave, slow tunes by Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke, then Barb went over to talk to Ginny. I was a sweating wreck by then, and the ugly feeling from the night before was all gone.

I started for the *whizzoir.*

"You won't like it," said a guy coming out of the men's room.

The smell hit me like a hammer. Someone had yelled New York into one of the five washbasins. It was half full. It appeared the person had lived exclusively for the last week on Dinty Moore Beef Stew and Fighting Cock Bourbon.

A janitor came in cursing as I was washing my hands.

I went back out to the ballroom. Mouse and the Trapps "Public Execution" was playing—someone who doesn't *dance* recorded that. Then came Jackie Wilson's "Higher and Higher."

"Dance with me?" asked someone behind me. I turned. It was Sharon. She must have Gone Borneo that afternoon. She'd been somewhere where they do things to you, wonderful things. She had on a blue dress and seamed silk stockings, and now she had an Aunt Peg haircut.

"You bet your ass!" I said.

About halfway through the next dance, I suffered a real sense of loss. I missed my butthole-length hair for the first time in ten years. The song, of course, was "Hair" off the original Broadway cast recording, Diane Keaton and all, and Joe Morton's wife Patricia, who had never cut hers, it grew within inches of the floor, suddenly grabbed it near her skull with one hand and whipped it around and around her head, the ends fanning out like a giant hand across the colored lights above the stage. Joe continued his Avalon-ballroom-no-sweat dancing, oblivious to the applause his wife was getting.

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Then they played the Fish Cheer and we all sang and danced along with "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die-Rag."

Then the lights came up and the entertainment director, Jamie Younts-Fulton, came to the mike and treated us to twenty minutes of nostalgic boredom and forced yoks. The tension was building.

"Now," she said, "for those of you who don't know, we've got them together again for the first time in nineteen years, here they are, Craig Beausoliel, Morey Morkheim, Abram Cassuth, and Andru Esposito, or, as you know them, *Distressed Flag Sale*!"

It was about what you'd expect—four guys in their late thirties in various pieces of clothing stretching across twenty years of fashion changes.

Morey'd put on weight and lost teeth, Andru had taken weight off. Abram, who'd been the only one without facial hair in our day, now had a full Jerry Garcia beard. Craig, who came out last, like always, and plugged in while we applauded—all four or five hundred people in the ballroom now—didn't look like the same guy at all. He looked like a businessman dressed up at Halloween to look like a rock singer.

He was a little unsteady on his feet. He was a little drunk.

"Enough of this Sixties crap!" he said. People applauded again. "Tonight, this first and last performance, we're calling ourselves *Lizard Level!*"

Then Abram hit the keyboard in the opening trill of "In-a-Gadda-da-Vida" for emphasis, then they slammed into "Proud Mary," Creedence's version, and the place became a blur of flying bodies, drumming feet, swirling clothes. The band started a little raggedy, then got it slowly together.

They launched into the Chambers Bros.' "Time Has Come Today," always a show stopper, a hard song for everybody *including* the Chambers Bros., if you ever saw them, and the place went really crazy, especially in the slow-motion parts. Then they did one of their own tunes, "The Moon's Your Harsh Mistress, Buddy, Not Mine," which I'd heard exactly once in two decades.

We were dancing, all kinds, pogo, no-sweat, skank, it didn't matter. I saw a few of the hotel staff standing in the doorways tapping their feet. Andru hit that screaming wail in the bass that was the band's trademark, sort of like a whale dying in your bathtub. People yelled, shook their arms over their heads.

Then they started to do "Soul Kitchen." Halfway through the opening, Craig raised his hand, shook it, stopped them.

"Awwwww," we said, like when a film breaks in a theater.

Craig leaned toward the others. He was shaking his head. Morey

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pointed down at his playlist. They put their heads together. Craig and Abram were giving the other two chord changes or something.

"Hey! Make music!" yelled some jerk from the doorway.

Craig looked up, grabbed the mike. "Hold it right there, asshole," he said, becoming the Craig we had known twenty years ago for a second. He leaned against the mike stand in a Jim Morrison vamp pose. "You stay right here, you're going to hear the god-damnedest music you ever heard!"

They talked together for a minute more. Andru shrugged his shoulders, looked worried. Then they all nodded their heads.

Craig Beausoliel came back up front. "What we're gonna do now, what we're gonna do now, gonna do," he said in a Van Morrison post-Them chant, "is we're gonna do, gonna do, the song we were gonna do that night in Miami . . ."

"Oh, geez," said Bob, who was on the dance floor near Sharon and me.

Distressed Flag Sale had gone into seclusion early in 1970, holing up like The Band did in the *Basement Tapes* days with Dylan, or like Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys while they were working on the never-finished *Smile* album. They were supposedly working on an album (we heard through the grapevine) called either *New Music for the AfterPeople* or *A Song to Change the World*, and there were supposedly heavy scenes there, lots of drugs, paranoia, jealousy, and revenge, but also great music. We never knew, because they came out of hiding to do the Miami concert to raise money for the family of a janitor blown up by mistake when somebody drove a car-bomb into an AFEES building one four A.M.

"It was a great song, man, a great song," said Craig, "It was going to change the world we thought." We realized for the first time how drunk Craig really was about then. "We were gonna play it that night, and the world was gonna change, but instead they got us, they *got us*, man, and we were the ones that got changed, not them. Tonight we're not Distressed Flag Sale, we're Lizard Level, and just once anyway, so you'll all know, tonight we're gonna do 'Life Is Like That'."

(What changed in Miami was the next five years of their lives. The Miami cops had been holding the crowd back for three hours and looking for an excuse, anyway, and they got it, just after Distressed Flag Sale made its reeling way onstage. The crowd was already frenzied, and got up to dance when the guys started playing "Life Is Like That" and Andru took out his dong on the opening notes and started playing slide bass with it. The cops went crazy and jumped them, beat them up, planted heroin and amphetamines in their luggage in the dressing rooms, carted them off to jail and turned firehoses on the rioting fans.

Everybody knew the bust was rigged, because they charged Morey with possession of heroin, and everybody *knew* he was the speed freak.

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And that was the end of Distressed Flag Sale.

It was almost literally the end of Andru, too. What the papers didn't tell you was that, as he was uncircumcised, he'd torn his frenum on the strings of the bass, and he almost lost, first, his dong, and then his life before the cops let a doctor in to see him.)

That's the history of the song we were going to hear.

Notes started from the keyboard, like it was going to be another Doors-type song, building. Then Craig moved his fingers a few times on the guitar strings, tinkling things rang up high, like birds were in the air over the stage, sort of like the opening of "Touch of Grey" by the Dead, but not like that either. Then Andru came in, and Morey, then it began to take on a shape and move on its on, like nothing else at all.

It moved. And it moved me, too. First I was swaying, then stomping my right foot. Sharon was pulling me toward the dance floor. I'd never heard anything like it. *This* was dance music. Sharon moved in large sways and swings; so did I.

The floor filled up fast. *Everybody* moved toward the music. Out of the corner of my eye I saw old Mr. Stoat asking someone to dance. Other teachers moved towards the sound.

Then I was too busy moving to notice much of anything. I was dancing, dancing not with myself but with Sharon, with Bob and Penny, with *everyone*.

All five hundred people danced. Ginny Balducci was at the corner of the floor, making her chair move in small tight graceful circles. I smiled. We all smiled.

The music got louder; not faster, but more insistent. The playing was superb, immaculate. *Lizard Level*'s hands moved like they were a bar band that had been playing together every night for twenty years. They seemed oblivious to everything, too, eyes closed, feet shuffling.

Something was happening on the floor, people were moving in little groups and circles, couples breaking off and shimmying down between the lines of the others, in little waggling dance steps. It was happening all over the place. Then *I* was doing it—like Sharon and I had choreographed every move. People were clapping their hands in time to the music. It sounded like steamrollers were being thrown around in the ballroom.

Above it the music kept building and building in an impossible spiral.

Now the hotel staff joined in, busboys clapping hands, maids and waitresses turning in circles.

Then the pattern of the dance changed, magically, instantly, it split the room right down the middle, and we were in two long interlocking linked chains of people, crossing through each other, one line moving up the room, the other down it, like it was choreographed.

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And the guys kept playing, and more people were coming into the ballroom. People in pajamas or naked from their rooms, the night manager and the bellboys. And as they joined in and the lines got more unwieldy, the two lines of people broke into four, and we began to move toward the doors of the ballroom, clapping our hands, stomping, dancing, making our own music, the same music, more people and more people.

At some point they walked away from the stage, joining us, left their amps, acoustic now. Morey had a single drum and was beating it, you could hear Andru and Craig on bass and guitar, Cassuth was still playing the keyboard on the batteries, his speaker held under one arm.

The street musicians had come into the hotel and joined in, people were picking up trash cans from the lobby, garbage cans from the streets, honking the horns of their stopped cars in time to the beat of the music.

We were on the streets now. Windows in buildings opened, people climbed down from second stories to join in. The whole city jumped in time to the song, like in an old Fleischer cartoon; Betty Boop, Koko, Bimbo, the buses, the buildings, the moon all swaying, the stars spinning on their centers like pinwheels.

Chains of bodies formed on every street, each block. At a certain beat they all broke and reformed into smaller ones that grew larger, interlocking helical ropes of dancers.

I was happy, happier than ever. We moved down one jumping chain of people. I saw mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, dinosaurs, salamanders, fish, insects, jellies in loops and swirls. Then came the beat and we were in the other chain, moving up the street, lost in the music, up the line of dancing people, beautiful fields, comets, nebulae, rockets and galaxies of calm light.

I smiled into Sharon's face, she smiled into mine.

Louder now the music, stronger, pulling at us like a wind. The cops joined in the dance.

Up Congress Avenue the legislators and government workers in special session came streaming out of their building like beautiful ants from a shining mound.

Louder now and happier, stronger, dancing, clapping, singing.

We will find our children or they will find us, before the dance is over, we can feel it. Or afterwards we will responsibly make more.

The chain broke again, and up the jumping streets we go, joyous now, joy all over the place, twenty, thirty thousand people, more every second.

As we swirled and grew, we would sometimes pass someone who was staring, not dancing, feet not moving; they would be crying in uncontrollable sobs and shakes, and occasionally committing suicide. ●

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THEM AND US:
Three Triplets and Three Sonnets

by Judith Moffett

H. sapiens neanderthalensis (Them)
and (Us) Cro-Magnon, forking from the stem
of common human stock ad hominem,

were equals; so with two enormous brains
and stone-age cultural parity, which genes
said we were fitter? What on earth explains

why *sapiens* survived Prehistory
all, all alone, to assume a mastery
over the warming world? Dark mystery.

Whether too well adapted to the Ice
or simply overrun and out-competed,
Neanderthal—a people separated
from *sapiens* by rather more than race
yet altogether human—disappeared.
Faced with the fact, one falls back on the sonnet:
for twenty thousand years we shared a planet
with someone else! Much more may have been shared,
like languages. Like bodies; Leakey claims
some, on a close enough genetic course,
"might have been absorbed by interbreeding"—
and we the very caveman of our dreams,
the unknown Other come to spit his curse
of vengeance, or as bridegroom, to the wedding.

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Some guess Neanderthal was more "humane"
(see William Golding's novel)—peaceful souls
stamped out by wolfish *sapiens* like his own
nightmare, or grassfire conscience. That's all balls.
Ourselves we know. Our next-of-living-kin
plan murder and are sometime cannibals
says Goodall. Count among the sons of Cain
also the underdog Neanderthals;
those scattered skeletons, base-battered skulls,
pelvis and rib with flint points driven in
and not by Us, and rough-cut human bone
charred for the feast, tell all. Stone chipping tools
helped small *erectus* break into the brain—
whose whelps we both were: dangerous animals.

At any rate we're here and we're alone,
smart as a whip and blinder than a bat.
Good sense made *sapiens* cooperate;
kindness was extra. Teaching apes to sign
beats talking to yourself, but what's it prove?
The fairy tale is mightier than the truth,
opinion sprouts from feeling, or from faith,
our DNA impels us to survive
by being avaricious letches, fleecing
competitors and founding dynasties,
same as it ever did; now, overnight,
we're meant to stop competing, stop increasing,
just *override* these headstrong helices
three billion years went into getting right!

Parts of this poem are excerpted from "The MissingLink," first published in *The Kenyon Review*—New Series, Spring 1982, Vol. 4, No. 2. Copyright ©1982 by Kenyon College. Reprinted with permission of the author and *The Kenyon Renew.*

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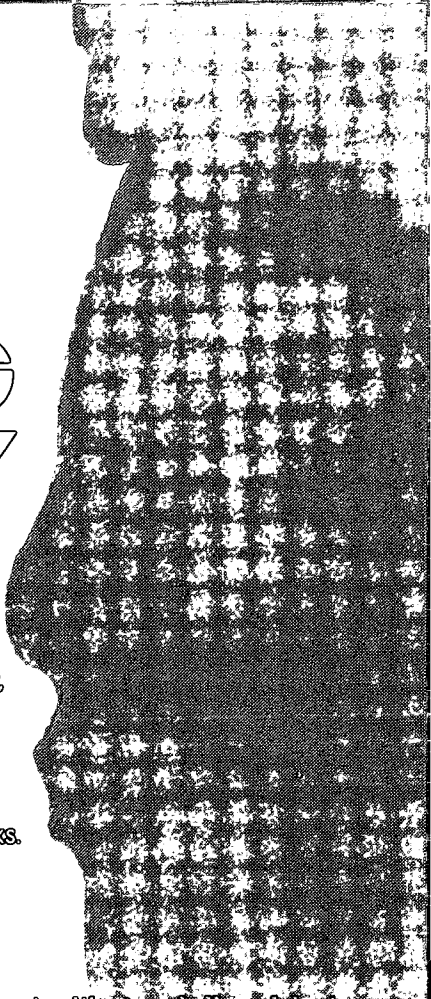
EVENING SHADOW

by Stephen Leigh

art: Nicholas Jainshigg



Stephen Leigh's short pieces have appeared in *Wildecards*, Bantam Books' shared world series, and in various other outlets. His most recent novels include *The Bones of God* and *The Crystal Memory*. These works were published respectively in 1986 and 1987 by Avon Books.

The room was dark, soft with a wet noise like torn bellows laboring under water.

There were two beds, each bearing an ancient, shriveled man; Elisa almost turned and left, then. She steeled herself with a visible straightening of shoulders that might have made her laugh, seeing it done by someone else. She moved toward the window, which was shuttered against a dull sunrise. A torn blind let in a wedge of dawn—it flared against whitened hair, against the starched and uncomfortable-looking pillow of the nearest man.

She'd not imagined that Tom would look this way. Her memory had halted his aging, left him a permanent fifty-one. She hated seeing what he'd become, the husk of her remembrance. It made her stomach sour.

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He wasn't asleep. His rheumy eyes stared blindly out, flecked with moist reflections, laced with blood. A trail of spittle ran down one corner of the slack mouth, the chest staggered up with slow breathing, the exhalation loud with a congestion that made her want to clear her own throat in sympathy. Elisa grimaced, her resolution wavering. Then she leaned forward—thinking suddenly that the bed resembled nothing so much as a large crib. Her movement stirred dead air: she caught a whiff of stale urine and sour breath. She stood and retreated a step, hugging herself.

"Tom?" she said. A whisper.

His head moved slightly. Dry hair rasped against cloth, but the eyes showed no recognition, didn't focus on her but on the window. He coughed. More sputum ran down his chin.

Elisa felt the tears coming. She sniffed, willing them back. Her stomach roiled with disgust. She half-turned, trying not to think, trying to avoid looking at the man again, for she knew that if she did she would cry. "I shouldn't have come, Tom." Her voice was harsh, growling. "I didn't want to remember you this way."

"He seemed to recognize you there for a second."

Startled, Elisa turned. An older black woman stared back—thin, spectral in whites, her hair salted with gray, a tray balanced on one bony hip. She glanced at Elisa appraisingly. "Granddaughter?"

Elisa smiled at that, tentatively. She nodded, accepting the lie—it would do. "Yes. How is he?"

The woman set the tray down on a wooden stand between the two beds. She didn't look at either of the men. She wheezed slightly, as if the effort of walking had tired her. "He's *old*, girl. That's all. He's just waitin' out his time. One day I'll come in here and he won't be breathin'." The woman's accent was a strange blend of midwestern blandness and southern twang. She smoothed the whites over her flat chest; her gaze held a faint challenge. "I seen his niece in here once, a year or more ago. She's the only one came. You think your parents might show up to see their daddy, wouldn't you?"

There was nothing Elisa could say to that—having accepted the role, she couldn't escape the accusation. His niece; that would be Agatha, in her sixties now . . . "They . . . don't live near here at all. Can't get away easily." She knew that she lied badly. *Even with the years of practice, it still doesn't come easily. You'd think I'd be more proficient at making up these damn tales.* Elisa's gaze skittered around the room, glancing anywhere but at the nurse.

"They the ones send money?"

"Yes." As always, one lie begat a string of others. Finding Tom had

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been difficult, but once she'd had the address, she'd sent money—always cash—once a month, whatever she could spare.

"Suppose they think it makes up for it. I guess this don't ride easy on their conscience." Then her tone changed, became softer and less bitter. "I'm sorry, honey. Workin' here gets you cynical. I don't mean to make you feel bad. *You* came, at least. I can see you care about him."

Elisa nodded. She attempted another smile, let it drift into a frown. She glanced down at Tom's empty, grizzled face, the eyes that stared at nothing. When she looked at him, she couldn't trust herself to speak. She only wanted to leave this place and its oppressive still air. "Yes, I care," she said.

The woman watched her strangely, then busied herself with the tray, arranging bottles needlessly. "Good. They need that, these 'uns. They can't say anything, most of the time, but I know they feel it. He'd thank you if he could." She paused and her voice was quickly warm, all reserve gone. "Look, I got to feed him and change the sheets. You want to help? I mean, it's not to get out of the work myself, I just thought . . ."

He's come full circle, being treated like a baby again . . . "No, I . . ." Elisa shook her head and then laughed, a sound that was half sob. "Fine, I'd like that."

It wasn't as bad as she thought it might be. The nurse was strong, competent, and quick, fussing over Tom and talking to him and Elisa the entire time. In the course of the monologue, Elisa learned that the woman's name was Louise Knott, that she'd been working at the Crestview Home ("There ain't no view, and it ain't much of a home") for four years, that Louise had three children. ("One boy in college, the other in high school—he graduates this year—and my oldest girl married and livin' in Colorado. She's ready to pop me a gran'child any day now.")

Elisa helped her with the other man in Tom's room ("You got to watch him, honey. He'll wake up a sudden and grab you, wantin' a kiss"). Then Louise let out a fervent sigh and clapped her hands together.

"Coffee time," she said. "Want some?"

"I'd love it."

"C'mon then."

Louise led her to a lounge off the main hallway. A few plastic tables sat in gaudy disarray before a smudged window overlooking an inner courtyard. A dog-eared and filthy deck of cards sat in one corner of their table. Louise poured coffee and brought back two Styrofoam cups. She took her seat with a groan.

"How old's your gran'pa?" the woman asked.

"Ninety-six," Elisa answered.

"I hope it don't bother you none to hear me say it, but he ain't gonna

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be here much longer. He's got it in his records he don't want no extra treatment; he's here to stay, here to die. That's the way he wanted it."

"Does he ever talk?"

"Is that what you came for, hoping to talk to him?"

"I . . . there were things I wanted to tell him, yes."

Louise shook her head. "He used to talk, a little. Not lately. And he never did say much. I remember him saying that you should never trust anyone. He was a bitter man, I think."

"He had his reasons. He always brooded a lot, and you had to drag his feelings out of him. I can imagine that he came to think that trust wasn't a safe feeling. I can understand that."

Louise fiddled with the cards, turning them over one by one. Someone had set them in order: Ace, King, Queen of Diamonds. "I'd'a thought he'd been a good man to love, if you could get past his moods. Not easy, though."

"No, he wasn't easy. God, I hate seeing him like this. He was so vital once, so caring. I wish life hadn't turned him so bitter. He never wanted anything more than a normal life—that's all anyone should want, huh? I wish—" Elisa found that she could say no more. She pressed her lips together, grimacing.

Louise's dark eyes glanced up from the cards. "That don't sound like no gran'daughter talkin'. Not the way you say it."

Elisa tried to smile, wondering how the expression looked to the nurse. "We were close once. A long time ago."

"Can't be *that* long ago for *you*, honey." Louise leaned back, picking up her cup again. The chair creaked against old linoleum, and her old, chocolate eyes stared. "Sometimes the way you talk, the way you carry yourself, I'd think you're older, but you can't be more'n twenty. Twenty-five at the most. Now me, I'm *old*." Louise grinned, laughing suddenly. "I've been married forty years now."

"It must be nice."

"Heck, Sam's an ol' coot that lets me do what I want." Again, the smile and a sidewise roll of eyes. "But I love 'im." She laughed.

Something in the woman's voice, in her warm and open manner, disarmed Elisa's caution, let her laugh along with her. Life had battered Elisa, set her adrift, but Louise's quick friendliness made Elisa want to trust her, when she'd trusted no one for too long. *Be careful. You're vulnerable. Be skeptical and distant.* "It must be hard, living with the same person that long."

"Nothin' to it. You just grow into each other, like two trees planted side by side."

"Don't you ever find that he's changed, that he's not the same person you thought he was?" Elisa scored the lip of her cup, a fingernail scraping

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against the Styrofoam with a screech. She stared down at her hand, intent. "Trees don't always grow together. Sometimes one kills the other. Sometimes they grow at different speeds."

"You change, too. You get older, just like he does. Nobody stays the same."

Elisa said nothing to that. Outside the window, another nurse was helping an elderly woman with a walker traverse the buckled asphalt of a sidewalk. Silently, Elisa watched them make the long journey across the courtyard. When she glanced back, Louise was staring at her again.

Elisa gave Louise the number of the motel at which she was staying. For the next few days, she visited the nursing home every morning, watching Tom for an hour or so, talking with Louise or one of the other nurses there, and then going back to the motel to sit and watch the static-infested TV. She had thought that she'd leave as soon as she'd seen Tom again, but something held her. She wasn't able to go, yet there was nothing here for her. She'd walk to a bar, drink a few beers, and ignore the overtures of the regulars. When she could feel the alcohol buzzing in her head, she'd go back to her room and let herself fall into the oblivion of sleep.

The shrill burring of the phone woke her. She tossed the covers aside, wondering if she'd dreamed it, rubbing at one eye. The phone rang again. Yawning, Elisa leaned over the bed and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hi. I know how early it is, honey, but I didn't have no choice. I knew you'd want to be here."

"Louise?"

"I'm sorry, Elisa. It's Tom, your gran'pa. He's havin' lots of trouble. I already called the doctor, but I thought you'd want to know."

Elisa looked for a clock, realized that there were none in her shabby room. "Thanks, Louise. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Make it quick, girl." Then: "I'm really sorry, honey."

"It was inevitable, wasn't it? You said that Tom knew it'd be soon. Don't be sorry."

"Don't matter. I still am. And I don't like being the one's got to give you the news. I have to go. See you soon."

Elisa heard the phone click on the other end. She sat for a few minutes with the phone on her lap, a tinny, distant recording imploring her to please hang up. She waited for the grief to hit her, expecting that at any moment the sadness would strike.

Nothing.

She felt nothing. The phone wailed in her lap.

* * *

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When she arrived, Louise was waiting at the door. Together, they walked the hall to Tom's room. "The doctor got here a few minutes ago," she whispered to Elisa, as if afraid to speak any louder. "Come on, I'll take you in."

A young man glanced up from the bedside. He straightened and glared at Louise, ignoring Elisa. "This man should have been in a hospital weeks ago. I've called the ambulance, but it won't be here in time. I hope that bothers you." He swung around to face Elisa without waiting for a reply. "You the relative?" His voice was gruff and weary.

"Yes."

"Then you'd better say good-bye." He snatched his stethoscope from his neck, stuffed it into a Gladstone bag beside the bed and, yawning, left. "I'll be right outside," he said as he brushed past Elisa. She stared after him until Louise touched her arm.

Tom's breath was a ragged stutter. The cheeks were hollowed, his skin sallow. One hand, a withered, brittle claw, lay outside the sheet. Elisa could see the rope of veins in it. He already looked dead, but the chest still rose, slowly, irregularly. Elisa stared down at him. She felt Louise's presence behind her.

"Don't mind the doctor," the nurse said. "I'll take care of him. Tom's requests were clear. He knew he was dyin' and he didn't want nothing special done."

Elisa nodded. She sat in a folding chair alongside the bed and took Tom's hand. His fingers were cold, and he didn't return the pressure of her touch. His eyes were closed, the lids flickering with restless movement.

"Tom, get down from there. Please, love."

Tom grinned at her from fifteen feet up in the branches of the oak. Carelessly, he let himself swing from the limb on one hand. He dropped several feet, grabbing another branch and then landing on the ground in a rustling of leaves. He gave her a careless, showy bow. She could hardly stay angry with him, not while he was standing there and smiling proudly at her, like a kid showing off.

"You fret too much," he'd told her. "We're both too young to worry about dying. You shouldn't be so afraid."

"Tom . . ." she began, then he laughed and grabbed her. Her protests turned to passion as he pulled her down into the grass beside him.

Yet he *had* grown old, and cautious, and brittle. She'd waited to grow old with him, but somehow had not. Who knew why? Some genetic accident, some chance combination of prenatal environmental factors? Whatever the reason, she had not—did not—age. She'd stayed the same, locked into an eternal twenty-one, while Tom and their friends aged and

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changed. She'd watched Tom's love become eroded by jealousy, bitterness, and suspicion until, finally, she'd had to leave.

"I'm here again, Tom," she said. "It's me, Elisa."

If he heard, he made no sign. He exhaled, thinly, with a rasping of mucus. Seconds dragged by; with a start, Elisa realized that Tom hadn't taken in that next breath, that he was not ever going to. There was a foul smell—his sphincter had relaxed.

Elisa bit her lower lip, shut her eyes. "Oh, damn. *Damn!*" She moved her hand away from his, hugging it to herself. *So that's the final ending of age: slow, anticlimactic, and degrading.* Elisa could hear the hush of Louise's steps as the nurse went to call in the doctor. The physician leaned past Elisa with another yawn. He checked the carotid for a pulse, listened for a heartbeat, pulled up one eyelid. He stood up. "In a hospital, I might have been able to keep him alive." He glared first at Elisa, then at Louise, as if they were to blame for the death.

"To what purpose?" Elisa asked angrily. She felt only bitterness. *Screw you!* she wanted to add. *It's not* my *fault he got old. Nothing's supposed to last. Nothing and no one.*

The doctor grimaced, looking as if he might retort, but he turned away with a growl of disgust. "The arrangements have been made?" He snapped shut the Gladstone. He was staring at Elisa again, the bag in his hand, his coat over his arm.

"No," Elisa said. "Well, I'm not sure . . . something . . ."

The look of irritation on the doctor's face deepened. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it's what he would have wanted." His sarcasm tore at her; Elisa fought off sudden tears. The man watched her, distantly. "I have to make out the death certificate. I'll need you to sign the forms, so see me before you leave. I'll be in the office."

When he was gone, she did cry, great wracking sobs that left her breathless and shuddering. Louise watched her, silent, a hand on Elisa's shoulder. The grief was more than simply Tom's death. It was the gestalt: the dingy room, the barrenness of Tom's passing, the contemptuous hostility of the doctor, the miserable loneliness that stretched behind her . . . and before her. The weeping passed, and she sat beside the body, sniffing, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue Louise silently handed her, wondering—obscurely—if she'd ruined the mascara she'd hurriedly put on that morning. "I must look a mess," she said.

"That you do, honey. Why don't you go clean up, then go into the lounge. I got coffee on, and they got to take care of Tom. Okay?" Louise smiled, patting Elisa's shoulder.

"Okay." She rose, glancing down again at the body. Louise hugged her; that started the tears again. Elisa clung to the thin nurse and Louise

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simply held her, smoothing her hair until, gasping, Elisa drew back. "God, I'm acting silly."

"No more'n anyone who's lost someone she'd loved. Go on, girl. Get yourself cleaned up."

Elisa felt slightly better when she came back into the lounge. The door to Tom's room was closed; she could hear indistinct voices inside. The crying had stuffed up her head—she felt like she'd just had a bad cold. Louise was waiting. As Elisa entered the lounge, the nurse poured a cup of coffee for her. "Here. You'll want it black."

Louise watched as Elisa blew on the steaming liquid and sipped. They sat at the same table as the other day. The early sun was just showing over the courtyard. Elisa set her cup down. Louise was still gazing at her, a faint smile on her mahogany face. Elisa cocked her head inquiringly.

"You ain't his gran'daughter, are you?"

Elisa tried to smile. "Of course I am. I—"

"Elisa, it don't matter to me. I never thought you were, not after I got to talkin' with you." Louise folded her hands on the table. "So, you gonna tell me?"

Elisa shrugged and said nothing.

Louise frowned at her. "You need to trust people more, girl."

Elisa laughed, soft and bitter. "I've tried that."

"And because it didn't work once or twice you ain't gonna try it again?" Louise grimaced, and sighed deeply. "Honey, I don't know if I'd believe what I think you might tell me. I might just think that you're some crazy woman been takin' too many drugs that messed up her mind. I might think that the reason Tom was so bitter was because he couldn't help you none either. I don't know what the truth is. Right now all I see's a young woman with lots of trouble and grief. That's what I care about. Can I help?"

"You already have."

Louise reached over the table. She took Elisa's hand in her own. She shook her head, frowning. From the hallway, an orderly stuck his head into the room. "Louise," he said. "They're ready."

The nurse sighed. Her hand drifted away from Elisa's. Louise downed the rest of her coffee in a gulp and stood. "Okay, girl, we gotta go. They're taking Tom. You all right?"

"Fine."

"That's a lie, too, but guess it'll have to do." Louise began to walk toward the door as Elisa moved her chair back from the table.

Tom had asked that his body be cremated. Elisa made arrangements with a local funeral home that Louise recommended. She fought with the

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director who wanted her to pay for embalming and a fancy casket, and then accompanied the body to the crematorium and watched them give Tom to the flames. She was the only mourner present. She'd thought that maybe Agatha would have heard about Tom's death and come; Elisa was glad she hadn't—it was one less confrontation to face, one fewer set of lies to tell.

Afterward, she went back to the motel. She packed her bag, intending to pay her bill and leave. Yet she couldn't. Sitting on the bed, she pulled a slip of paper from her purse. She picked up the phone and punched in the numbers. One ring, two, three: Elisa was about to hang up when someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Louise?"

The line crackled, hissed. "Elisa, that you? What's the matter, girl?"

She didn't know what to say. She was drained, devoid of words. The faint voice on the other end seemed too distant. "Elisa?"

"Umm, listen," Elisa said, afraid that Louise might hang up if she didn't speak. "I know that it's—" she hesitated and then the words came out in a rush "—Could I come and see you?"

Had the answer been at all delayed, had it seemed hesitant, Elisa would have made excuses. She would have laughed and pretended that the request had simply been an idle whim. But Louise spoke immediately. "Of course. Sam'll drive over with me and get you—he's jus' sittin' here watching TV. We'll be right there. You okay?"

The relief she felt made her laugh, a giggle ending in a half-sob. "I think I'm fine now. I just don't want to be alone for a while, that's all. You're sure it's not an imposition?"

"Don't be so blamed polite, girl. I got cake and coffee, and I'll show you off to Sam—he's a sucker for a pretty face like yours. We can sit and talk if that's all you want. Honey, you sound terrible. Look, just pack your things while we're on our way. We got a room you can use and that motel's pretty dismal."

"You always take in strays?"

"Three cats and two dogs."

"I couldn't," Elisa said, automatically.

"You don't have a choice, girl. Sam's already got the keys out."

"Louise, thank you. I can't tell you what this means."

"Yes, you can. That's the price of admission. It may take some time, but that's somethin' we got enough of, I guess. How 'bout it?"

Elisa clutched at the receiver. In the background, she could hear noise: a door opening and closing, a TV set being turned off in mid-word. Louise's breath rattled the receiver, patient. A dog barked.

"I'll be ready," Elisa said. ●

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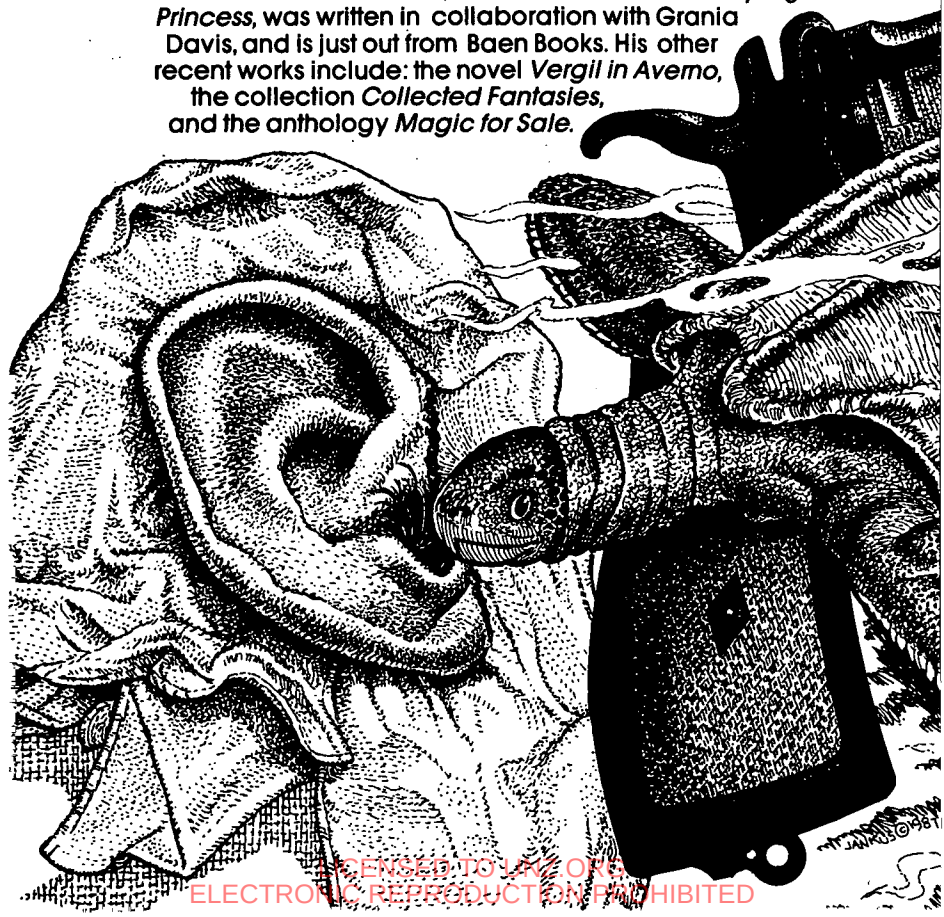
EL VILVOY DE LAS ISLAS

by Avram Davidson

art: Hank Jankus

Avram Davidson's latest novel, *Marco Polo and the Sleeping Princess,* was written in collaboration with Grania Davis, and is just out from Baen Books. His other recent works include: the novel *Vergil in Averno,* the collection *Collected Fantasies,* and the anthology *Magic for Sale.*



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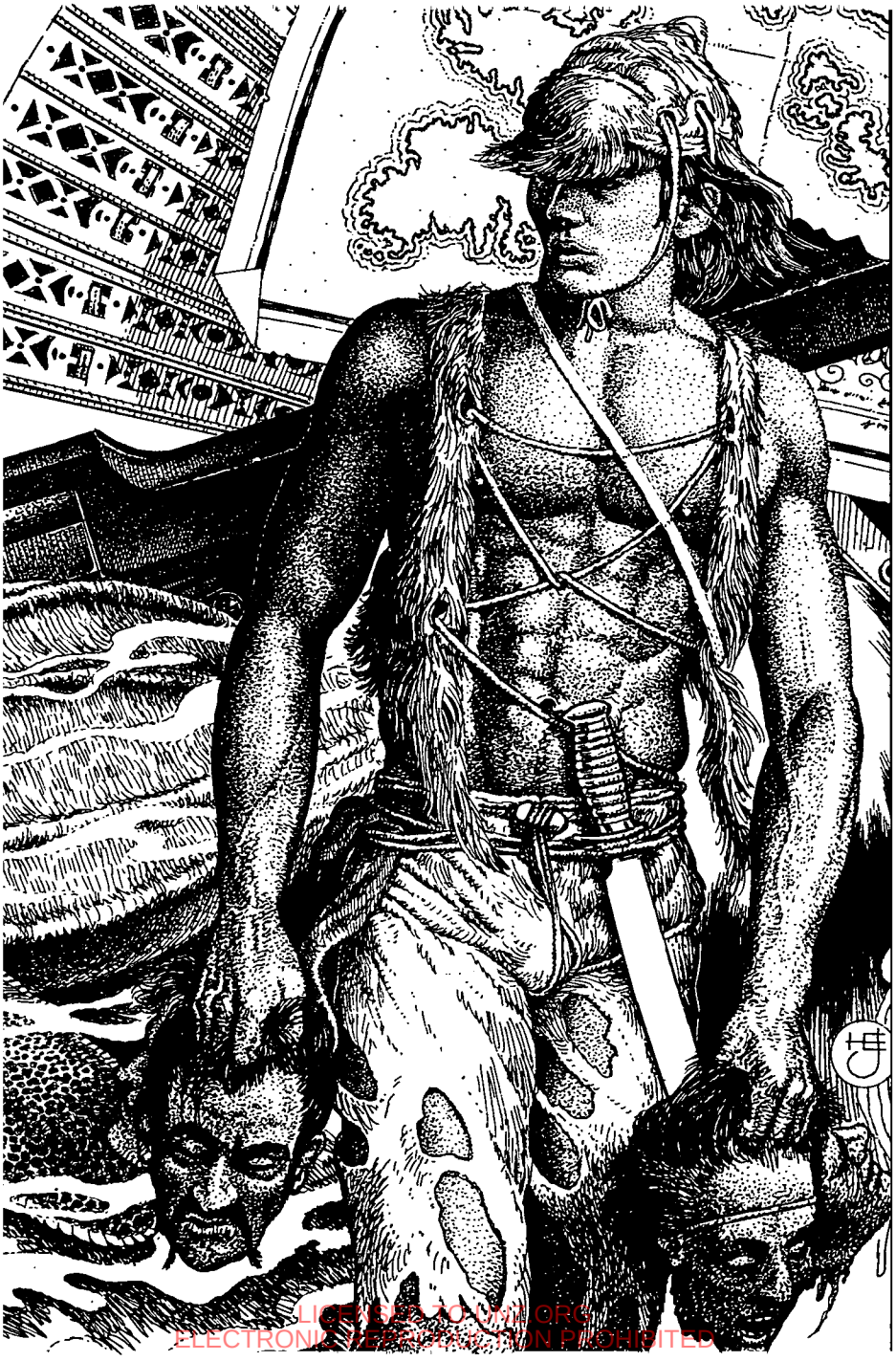

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Ah, las islas encantadas! Ah, in fact, the visions which the name itself enconjures! How many other archipelagoes, some of them quite non-existent, have borne that enchanted name before it was finally settled on the group of islands in the South Atlantic . . . settled at least by some, that is. Perhaps these wild, wild islands had indeed not ever been visited by Da Gama, Vespucci, the brothers Pinzon, Sebastian Cabot, Ponce de Leon, Cartier, Drake, Sir Jno. Hawkins, and many another. And then, after all, perhaps they had. As Lope de Vega (¿Cervantes? ¿Calderon?) puts it in his dry, spare style, ¿Quien Sabe?

Not I.

My friend Diego had driven up with the Land Rover of his choice—a Safari Wagon, with space for twelve passengers and the driver (much good it would be without one), or, say, two people and lots and *lots* of baggage: a point which he made almost at once.

"Oh, I don't doubt it," I said, admiring the spare tire, and fancying myself . . . almost . . . in Kenya, with Papa.

"How would you like to drive down to the Straits of Magellan?"

"Sorry. I just washed my beard, and I can't do a thing with it."

"No, I am not joking; how would you like—"

"Diego. Please."

And that was how I came to be driving down to the Straits of Magellan. Can one drive *up* to it? (them?) Certainly . . . if you start in Tierra del Fuego. Nothing to it, I suppose. Diego told me many stories of his boyhood, his family, his young manhood, his family, his country. And his family. After we crossed the Equator (I had crossed it twice, by sea, and was able to contain my enthusiasm this third time) the stories grew fewer, and his sighs more frequent. I do not wish to, indeed I can't, dismiss the entire South American continent cavalierly (or, for that matter, in any other way)—but this is not that story. As we went further and further South, of course, it grew colder and colder. As for the land along the Straits of Magellan, I realized that they had never been fully developed as Summer resorts; they were, I understood, cold. Very cold. And very, very wet.

After rising from sleep and sleeping bag one morning almost in slow motion, I faced not only the foothills of the Andes (I was looking westward), but the fact that I was not only no longer young, I was not even middle-aged any more. "Diego," I said, "my osteopath told me there would be days like this: plain old degenerative osteoarthritis done got me. Leave me here to sink my bones into some hot bath, and catch me when you come back." Although Diego gave me much sympathy, I felt that he was in some way rather relieved. Often and vividly as he had described to me his family, it was by now certain that he faced returning to them

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with something less than the wilder zeals. Folklore has prepared us for the Latin Americans with very many stereotypes, so that when they pick up their guitars and burst into "¿Alla en rancho grande!"—and sometimes they really do—we feel that this is all as it should be, and we are prepared for that. But folklore has not prepared us, in North America, with any stereotypes at all, really, for Latin Americans of the deep south of South American latitudes. Reunited with his family after many years in the United States, how would Diego react? How would his family react? And how would *I* react? Perhaps these considerations also engaged Diego's mind, for, although he assured me that hot baths were available in his family home, his tone lacked something of its once-enthusiasm.

"At any rate," he said at last, "I cannot simply leave you," his arms swept the chill, sparse landscape, "*here.*"

"Well, in the next town or city, then."

"No, no: *mucha bronca gente.* Ah!" his face lit up, "I shall leave you with people I know, in Ereguay! It is not far, no, no, not even so far as the distance between New York and Milwaukee. I know some people there very well, no, nonsense, they are very nice people, they will be very glad to have you." All this (I thought to myself) was as it may be; but it was no time nor place for an argument; once there in that other country, about which I knew next to nothing, surely I could find what we used to call "reasonable accommodations"; Diego might assure me till his breath stopped smoking, but, face to face with the realities of the situation, he would accept my decision.

Gad! he'd better!

The rest of the trip, that is, of my trip to Ereguay, was rather painful, bodily; but the spirit of the journey seemed to have lightened with our common realization that, after all, Diego would not have to explain his family to me, and me to his family. That all the reproachful scenes beginning, "Far be it from me to reproach you, but," could now do without the intrusive presence of an outsider and a foreigner, de populo barbaro, as it were. Popu*l*o? Popo*l*o? Oh, well.

Descriptions of the fertile vineyards, the empires of wheat, the plantations of yerba mat(t)e, herds of kine and swine: these I must leave to others: lo! are they not already waiting in the wings?

The weather grew warmer, though never hot. The suburb where my friend's friends lived was old, and, I have imagined, Roman-suburb-like, with many a well-tended vegetation, lots of well-kept walls, and even (the plant which I chiefly recognized) roses, roses; the señores Murphy were at home—what? yes, Murphy. It would be indeed charming to write they still, after three, or who knows maybe more, generations, still spoke English with a lovely brogue; not so. No brogue at all? No brogue at all,

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he had brought me to Murphys with no brogue at all. Of course, yes, they did speak English, only English did they speak as soon as it was realized that this was my language; it was a rather flattened-out English, you would never in a million years have guessed, had you met them in, say, Switzerland, what part of the world they were from. And they expressed no surprise at all on learning that Diego proposed to deposit me with them; evidently this was, really was, the way things were done down there. Diego lingered three days, so it was scarcely that he was dropping me abruptly. And, as we waved him off, laden with gifts for his parents, I seemed to be part of the family which belonged in that villa, in that never-before-heard-of-by-me suburb of Ciudad Ereguay—of which, in fact, I had hardly heard of, itself, until then. A papal person had not long before said, publicly, that he was there to represent church interests in Paraguay, Uruguay, Ereguay, "and every other kind of -guay" (i.e. "woe"); it was curious how very suddenly the Vatican had need of him at home, after all. I make no claim that I saw "the real Ereguay," indeed, even the unreal Ereguay I scarcely saw outside the very far-stretching walls of the villa where, twice a day, a hot bath was drawn for me, and where I received every conceivable creature comfort and every conceivable courtesy. In very little time the youngest children climbed into my lap, and even the next to youngest also came over and gave me a good morning and a goodnight kiss. Beside my ample bed, a "*matrimonial*" in the grand old style, upon the nightstand were laid such items as an English-language newspaper (rather thin, as though the fat had been stripped off it), an elderly novel by Michael Arlen, but one which I had never read, and a fairly recent copy of the Illustrated London News.

But if I were to go into detail we should never get anywhere, so let us get to a sort of small garden party, no, not a party, an informal gathering, well, it was in the garden; it was only a few days that I had been a guest, I was sure that I had yet to meet every single member of the extended Murphy family, let alone very many members of the English-speaking population of Ciudad Ereguay. There was a señora Angela de Something, whose husband was Someone in the civil service, un burócrata, as it was, I thought, succinctly put; a doctora Maria del Pilar Guzman, I am not certain of the area of her doctorate—gastroenterology perhaps, early colonial rent-rolls perhaps, you can't tell any more, men or women; however—I am aware of opening myself to all sorts of attacks, but nevertheless I shall make this statement: I seldom saw a woman of the upper middle or upper classes there who did not have lines of discontent around the mouth, and I seldom saw a woman of the working class there who was not happy and smiling and laughing. Spit on me, stone me, that's the way I saw it. There was an older man all in black and white, who at first glimpse I thought was a priest, but upon further attention was

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revealed to be an attorney; and there was a younger man, light-haired, in open shirt and khakis, whom I did not assess: he turned out to be a priest. Presently there entered a young man who was not introduced, he had rather longish and very brown hair, a farmer or perhaps a hunter by the look of him, and I don't recall that he said three words all the time he was there. And also someone was there, a doña Alberta, certain to be recognized everywhere as a Universal Grandmother; she was a moderately well-known British novelist on a visit from her home in the Isle of Wight. There were one or two others. I do not remember.

Someone had politely asked doña Alberta something, and she said, "I am always interested in hearing of the legends and folklore wherever I am. Vin du pays, one might say. Won't someone please tell me something of that?" She was a courageous woman; very often one is told fairly crisply that there are no legends, no folklore, all such things have passed quite away. But now, almost at once, licenciado Huebner said, "Ah, of course! We have the tragical tale of la llorona," and he proceeded to tell us, in great detail and with much local color, the story of The Weeping Woman, which is found wherever Spanish is spoken and mis-spoken throughout the world; right at this moment in your city someone is telling it *now*, and naming the very neighborhood, through which you have unwittingly passed, where the unfortunate events occurred. I purposely do not tell it here, let it come, perhaps, as a surprise.

Someone said, "Muy tragico." Heads were nodded. And then someone else said, "Well, we have also the legend of el vilvoy de las islas."

The novelist asked, "Did you say 'veal boy'? Or 'beel voy'?"

Our host spelled it for her (and for me, too), "V-i-l-v-o-y," and added, "We pronounce it—"

But I did not then hear how they pronounced it, because before the attorney had more than begun, the young priest—not meaning, I am sure, to be impolite, merely he was a bit emphatic—said, " 'El Vilvoy,' but that is surely a collection of nonsense!"

The attorney said, very calmly, and as one certain of his facts, "Sometimes we provincials, with all our naif enthusiasm, nevertheless arrive at a conclusion more veridical than the sophisticates of the metropolis."

"Oh, but surely I did not say 'provincials'; and if, by 'the metropolis,' you mean Spain, or Madrid in particulr, certainly I am a madrileno, but—"

A servant approached with a tray. " 'El *vil*voy,' " repeated Mrs. Phlux (her real name), the novelist. "But what does that *mean*?" More than one person began, perhaps, to reply.

Our host, taking advantage of the abrupt silence which fell after several people had realized that they were all speaking at once, said, in a rather musing voice, "It is certainly rather curious, indeed coincidental,

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but . . . just this morning I was in the library, looking through some old volumes, especially a set of Dickens which I suppose my grandfather had had bound as it had his rubrico embossed on the covers, when I found a sort of scrapbook which had been maintained on this subject. Here is Ruy with the chocolate for which his wife is famous, and I shall ask him to bring the scrapbook while we are sipping some of it."

The chocolate well deserved that she should *be* famous, it was excellent (Lina had made it. Her name was Lina), it was miraculous. And while Alberta Morris (her maiden- and pen-name) was drinking it, her eyes seemed to grow larger and larger. She gave a perceptible smack as she took the cup away from her mouth, and then she said, " 'El *vil*voy'! But what does that *mean*?"

> From La Voz de la Nación, With Seccion in ingles:
> What a storm of outrage swept through the streets and houses of our Ciudad Ereguay when one heard yesterday night that affront had been offered to our well-known and well-beloved mis Brethe ohara by a bruto whose name will shortly be discovered by our conscientious polis who all night sourced the meaner streets and alliedways which do no honour to us. The dear mis Vertha the grand daughter of capitan Monserrat our great Patriotic Hero had been delayed on some errand of merci to an umble casa near the port section of «town» when coming out en route to the awaiting carriage of her Papa the inglis coronel OHara (the idiom ingles does not contain of the letter *R*, hence coronel = *colonel* and Londres = *London*, how curious) when from the penumbrous area of some copse of trees there emerged that criminal Typico with pistole in hand who seized this innocent Mis roughly by one arm and exclaimed,—I will have at least jour money and ¡perhaps more!"

In the opinion of some people (in fact, of lots), a little of such style goes a long way. A very long way. And yet . . . someone many years ago told me, as regards "more accurate" translations of the Bible, that he would rather read *Arise, O Lord* than *Get up, God*. And although we are dealing here with an entirely secular text, yet there is a something in the flavor of the Basic Form of it which appeals to me more than a smoother version might. Readers who disagree will still, I hope, excuse me if some more of the original from time to time seeps through.

Avanti.

Leaving to one side his discursions about the importance to the national economy of the Col. O'Hara's factory where Ereguayan cattle were processed into an essence of beef much advertised in the United Kingdom,

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and reminders of the late and great Cap. Monserrat's famous charge up the slope of Castel Ereguay to bring the Royal Spanish flag tumbling down; our reporter (Señor Cruz) at length describes the young girl's piteous cries for help, the shameful cowardice of some unnamed "city-men" who were nearby but evidently afraid of the "pistole"—and finally plunges into the matter of our story, videlicet that there then stepped forward with impetuous gait a most remarkable young man in almost ragged garments in antique cut of "raw hyde" and upon his feet curious footwear devised also from the uncured skin of an animal, such as one has not observed in years but only in illustrations of some old leyendas. Upon his head also a hat of shaggy leather.

This young man of such startling appearance, when he heard the cry of fear and pain from the defenseless girl, Mssi Evereth, uttered a savage shout and leaped forward swinging his bushknife, or machete. Quickly he slashed in such a way as to draw the scoundrel's blood, who [the scoundrel] was immediately lost to sight as he fled, the coward, into the enveloping darkness.

It appears that he made his way, the monster, to the night clinic of the Medical Hospital where he attempted to have reattached the severed ear, which he had brought with him "untidily wrapt" in a rag. But the "advanced medical student" on duty insisted that "a chirurgeon" would have to be summoned. Whereat "the retch fled yet again into the night. And one hears that he is attempting to depart our Countery by the back trials. But the frontera guards have been alerted by telegraph and he must soon be catched, the fiend. Unless of course he may find refuge amongst the teeming criminals which always protect the profugitives in the adjacent republic (so-called) of Bobadilla y Las Bonitas (el B & B, as we crisply put it). Falseley does that other country claim the Las Islas Encantadas, for which we are ready to shed our blood."

Further, La Voz de la Nación had gathered the following information. The young man whose manners and appearance reminds one of the works of Juan Jacques Ruso or the novel Paul y Virginia, not to mention the arcetypo classico Robisson Cruso, is Antonio the son of the pioneer settlers Kielor, Swiss or perhaps Baltico in origin. The patriarco Kielor's son resides with his parents and "some infant bothers" in the island Encantada Grande, whence he has come with his father to the mainland of our Republic to purchase what few supplies their humble and hard-working efforts have enabled them to afford. The europeans Sr. and Sra. Kielor have for several years inhabited all by themselves and young children this rugged Island part of that archipelago. ¡See, how they naturally regard their capital city as Ciudad Ereguay and not of some other nacion as it speciously proclaims! And there they have lived alone for

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most of one year to another, it being unusual to have even a visit from a fisherman's bote because of distance and the savage seas.

Having been thus raised practically alone in a wildness, he has grown up, as one says, «a wild boy,» wearing no clothes not a produduccion of that wildness and "never was sick a day in his life," as he declares in his simple wholesome and naif way. Although void of any artifice and entirely sans sophistication exactly as one has read about in books by european savants. But consider the bravery of this doubtless Wilde Boy who has never been one day in school, how he rushed forward, careless of his own life, a true cavalier of the wilderness, he well deserves to be considered a noble son and citizen of this Republic, the justly named wildboy without a thought of fear, so similar to the bravo capitan Monserrat, our National Hero, whose garnddaughter [here the clipping ends]

Thus the report as written by Gustavo Gomez Cruz, who for many years wrote the English-language column Amigos Friends, for the daily La Voz de la Nación of which allegedly his brother-in-law was sole proprietor; but what difference does it make? As for this first mention of "Antonio" Kielor, it seems certain that mostly it was true. Thus the legend of the Wild Boy of the Islands sprang almost full grown in an instant, or anyway in a night. A few comments now to those sceptical persons who are everywhere. It is said that the boy certainly did not wear a goatskin hat in the manner of Crusoe, but that the hatband may have been goatskin. It is said that his clothes were certainly not all made of rawhide, though parts of them may have been—and certainly his shoes or sandals or boots, whatever one may call them (moccasins?) had been made by the elder Kielor himself; and why not? Furthermore, in regard to the incident at the Night Door of the hospital, there has been some sceptical insistence that the man who had appeared there for medical or surgical attention to his ear had certainly not carried it with him in a rag, despite the firmness of the legend on this detail; but that it had been severely bitten in a cantina brawl and bore no mark of a slash with a sharp weapon such as a machete. (As for the Legend, it adjusted itself on this point: the Wild Boy had both slashed the thug with his machete and *then* bitten off his ear . . . which the thug then wrapped in a rag and carried with him to the Infirmary: a newspaper drawing not long after showed a figure looming out of darkness and carrying in one hand a pistol and in the other an Object out of which blood dripped along the ground. It was very vivid; indeed the stuff of legend.) As for the subsequent history of this man—or, if there were indeed two—either man: there is no subsequent history; fables of an earless man howling for revenge in the moonlight are, simply, fables. The darkness had swallowed him or them and the darkness continued to, as it were, keep him/them

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swallowed. Which, since we are in the presence of Legend, is perhaps as it should be.

And in regard to the young man's given name, really it was not Antonio, an understandable mistake; evidently his full name was William Washington Kielor; this not having been fixed into law by the Medes and the Persians, he was sometimes called "Bill," sometimes "Billy," and sometimes (often) "Tony." And the elder Kielors were, very simply, from the Isle of Man . . . perhaps this is not as simple as it sounds . . . it may be that Sr. Gomez Cruz really did think that Man was a canton in Switzerland or an island in the Baltic Sea (there, after all, *are* islands in the Baltic Sea . . . *aren't* there?), or, it might be, that the word *Manxman* was a bit beyond him. At any rate, the elder Kielors had had some earlier experiences with island life. Why didn't they, if tired of, say, life in London, simply go *back* to the Isle of Man? Perhaps because it was full of English tourists, all hoping to hear one of the eleven or fifteen people who could still speak Manx. And as for that simply despicable person sitting over there in the corner and muttering that the old Manx form of the name was Illiam (cognate Gaelic *Liam*), without an initial "W"—why, let him go back where *he* came from.

Señor Murphy having paused at this point to wet his whistle, like, with a sip of chocolate, Señora Murphy turned to the ?hunter? farmer? fellow; "Your family, they are all well, I trust?" The young man answered, simply, "Yes." After a moment she said, "My aunt will appear presently." I had, somehow, a faint impression that she had forgotten or simply did not know his name, but she had evidently touched the right note, because he then said, "Ah." Not one of your very talkative types, evidently. Afraid he might scare away the game, or make the off-ox turn left instead of Right. Ivan Sanderson once said that people speak of "the silence of the jungle," when, really, they are very noisy places . . . or did Ivan Sanderson say just the opposite? I met him once or twice, a very nice man: but he is gone now.

But, as to the matter of "William" or of "Bill," that is nothing compared to the word(s) . . . phrase, perhaps . . . title, perhaps . . . set down crisply enough by Gomez Cruz at least twice (if not consistently) as "Wild Boy." Although one stands, shall we say, surprised at his statement that "English contains no 'R,' " it certainly seems that Spanish does not make abundant use of "W." Let us, however, not forget that "W" = Double "U," that "U" and "V" are variant forms of the same letter, and that there are a number of languages (including Spanish) in which "V" and "B" are not what one would call clearly distinct: consider Servia and Serbia, Habana and Havana, Sevastopol and Sebastopol—and, for that matter, Avram and Abram. The second given name of old Kielor's oldest son was to cause the journalists and typesetters of Ciudad Ereguay enor-

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mous difficulties: sometimes it appeared as Vashington, sometimes as Boshindon or even Uachignton, or . . . sometimes . . . Washington. (Old Kielor was much impressed by Immense Liberator Figures.) But mostly young Kielor was referred to in the press as The Wild Boy, two English words also not without their transliterational difficulties and which went through sundry forms as El Vild Boy, Wild Voy, Vildouy, or—finally and eternally—Vilvoy: a headline from some time later: BIENVENIDA VILVOY. Further transmutations and confusions, such as Bill Boy, Billy Boy, and Bell Boy, we will leave as well enough alone. *Vilvoy.* There! The Ereguayans knew a good loanable word when they saw one; it just took them a while to pin it down and stabilize it. And have we of the inglish idiom done a sight better with Montecuzuma or whatever, and—for that matter—*batata?*

No *indeed.*

Well, that more or less completes our survey of what we might call El Vilvoy, Part One.

Onward.

It was the practice for many years of Col. O'Hara, in his capacity as Honorary British Vice-Consul, to call formally once a year at the Presidential Palace and deliver a Note reminding the Republic of the British Claim to Las Islas Encantadas (HM Government, what with the Maori and the Mahdi and other such vexatious people, having other matters than that small southern Atlantic archipelago on the front of their desks. What? "its"? "desks"? Nonsense. "Her Majesty's Government *are,*" no more to be said)—Claim to Las Islas Encantadas (or, as My Lords preferred to call them, Lord Iggen's Islands); after the delivery of which The President would give him a glass of sherry and a segar . . . both, we understand, very good . . . and then they would enjoy a half-hour's pleasant conversation on the subject of, as it might be, horseflesh . . . that is to say, not hippophagy, but breeding. French reminders of the French Claim were more sporadic (echo in *Cada Dia,* of Ciudad Bobadilla: NAPOLEON III HAS ESCAPED FROM ENGLAND AND IS DESTINED TO ARRIVE IN THE ISLAS ENCANTADAS. Nap Three never made the scene, alas.). But the Claims of the adjacent Republic (adjacent to Ereguay, that is; not to France) of Bobadilla y Las Bonitas were something else. True that both Republics were agreed that Spanish sovereignty of the Islands, after the overthrow of Spanish colonial rule, had passed to . . . had passed to . . . passed, aye, there's the rub! Passed to *whom?* Or, *to which?* Opinions differed. They very much differed. And continued to differ.

Nine Days Wonders we always have with us, and perhaps interesting news was a bit scarce at that time, at any rate, the newspapers in Ciudad

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Ereguay certainly made very much of the Vilvoy. And so did opinion in the not-inconsiderable portion of the public which did not read newspapers. Tributes to his modesty and, if not to his piety (old Kielor, on the single occasion when he was solicited about theology, declared himself to be a believer in An Universal Force or Influence, y nada mas), then anyway to his filial piety: headline in La Prensa Nacional: VILVOY THINKS ONLY OF HIS PAPA. We who described yesterday the collection of a purse to reward the Wil Voy for his courage are now proud to disclose that, when asked what gift he desired, the vil voy replied, "Only a pouch of good English tobacco for his papa!" It seems that the father Kielor grows naturally his own tobacco in those Islands which pertain to our Country, but this year the crop was not all what was hoped for. Colonel Ohara, father of the augustly descended sweet and becomingly timid girl whose life the Vil Dvoy saved, immediately ordered purchased and placed on board the fishingvessel by which father and son will return to their chosen island of settlement an entire case of the best Inglish pipe tobacco available from the enterprising merchnats here. El Vilvoy professed himself delighted. The Prensa has learned that the coronel has offered either or both of the Kielors good employment at the factory which produces the beef essence that the English use as tea, but that they both declared that nothing will make them surrender their residencia and small farm which with such hard labour they have acked, or hewn as one might say, from the wilness. We are also precisely informed by the Ministry of National Lands that a writ of title to the aforesaid terrain will be most immediately issued to the señor Kielor.

Señora K. had remained in the Islands with her younger children; when asked if he were not afraid of her safety the father Kielo declared that no one who lives under the flag of the Republic of Ereguay need fear any man. Also he reminds us that in a true state of the Natura one lives in harmony with nature's laws, and then remains always without the well-founded fears to which the urban dweller is a prey. Both he and his brave son el vilvoy wear their hair much long except that the latter of course has almost no veard upon his manly young face. Observe please readers the likeness of his fearless and untainted countenance in this Press via means of the latest photographic process . . .

Thus it is possible precisely to date the first-known photograph of el vilvoy; and in fact this photograph was reproduced and sold widely for quite a while through the cuidad and in one or two provincial towns, both in black-and-white and in sepia.

Father and son (and a cargo of more supplies than either had hoped for; old Kielor would not accept money, which he in fact called by many harsh names; but he agreed to accept agricultural tools, seeds, and nurs-

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ery stock, fishing lines and hooks, gunpowder, lead, cartridges, and a nice new shotgun) returned presently to their far-distant Island Home. Quite a throng saw them off at the mole. And the Ministry of Correction and Justice quietly put away its plans to locate a penal colony somewhere in the Islands.

When the newspapers said (as say they did) that the President of Ereguay, Eduardo Gaspar de la Vara, D.D.S., had promised that he would visit the pioneering family when he could manage to find the time to escape from the cares of state, they said but the truth. Dr. de la Vara was then in his forty-second year, he had attained to office entirely by constitutional means and he was determined to leave office in the same manner. His physician, Dr. Cipriano Madariaga, said to him one day after the routine examination, "Previous holders of your august office have been either soldiers or attorneys; you are unique in having a scientific degree, therefore may I speak with you, not as citizen to president, but as one scientist to another?"

"Securely you may," said el doctor don Eduardo. "Proceed."

"If I were to work too hard," said Madariago, "my assistant could always assume my duties—for a limited period of time, of course. ("Of course.") Only . . . the lay person scarcely appreciates that the corpus and the spiritus are entirely intertwined; do you agree?"

"Agreement the most absolute."

"We say of a garment made of good sound cloth, that 'it wears like iron,' do we not? and yet even iron may eventually wear out, so—"

Here the president interrupted. He was a small man. But he was courageous. "Are you about to tell me, Sir Medicin Doctore, that I am aboout to wear out?"

The physician crossed himself three times. "I beg of you, my friend, do not jump to conclusions. Any man who works hard may require a rest in order to recuperate his powers. But if, unlike, say, *me*, you should require a rest, is there someone who could assume your duties until—"

Perhaps Gaspar de la Vara rapidly considered the political state of affair in Ereguay. "Sir Medical Doctor, you have reason!" he exclaimed. "No, there is not . . . save, perhaps for the very shortest period of time."

Dr. Madariaga nodded. "How short a period of time? Could you not take a rest for . . . say . . . two weeks? Only two weeks? As your friend, I implore you. As your physician, I order you!"

Gaspar de la Vara came to a, perhaps, rapid decision. "And what sort of a rest?" he enquired. "For two weeks, not more."

"Alas," said the physician, "we have here no healing springs, spas, they are called in Europe. How they invigorate! How they juvenescate! But . . . facts are facts . . . and in the absence of any such in our own country, and as it is impossible to go to Europe right now, I have no

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hesitation to recommend . . . " He hesitated. ". . . .a short sea-voyage," he concluded. And watched the other's face.

Immediately the President exclaimed, "I shall make a cruise of our overseas territories!"

"You will sail around the Enchanted Islands in the national yacht?"

"No, I shall go via the steam vessel—and I shall keep well in mind the maritime wisdom of the Liberator!" His friend the medical doctor slapped him on the back, and they embraced.

From a contemporary statement in La Voz: "The President will make a voyage of inspection beyond the seas in keeping with the famous maritime maxim of the Liberator. Did not the Liberator himself declare that, 'Whoso controls the sea, controls the coast; and whoso controls the coast controls the interior. Therefore, whoso controls the sea, paradoxical as it may seem, he controls the interior'? Indeed. It is not necessary to explicate the reference to the Liberator Ignacio Gomez de la Cedilla, often called the San Martin (or the Bolivar) of Central Coastal South America, East; of whom the whole world has heard. Almost."

In fact, the Republic of Ereguay was the current owner of the locomotive vessel *La Victoria* (formerly Her Britannic Majesty's Steam Ram *Sink*); and this at a time when the adjacent Republic of Bobadilla y Las Bonitas had only recently recognized that the gallery was obsolete, and the adjacent Republic of Nueva Andorra had acquired the former Confederate privateer *Arkansas* (it had been engaged, in the interim, in the corned-mutton trade out of Port Bangalong, Eastern Australia). This exemplum of "the fleet in being" had struck terror into the hearts of all would-be invaders of the Ereguayan littoral (not even do we exempt Brazil). Commanding the *Victoria* was the capitan da Costa, and also present was the learned and unpredictable Dr. Hector Macvitty.

Capitan da Costa made up for his Brazilian birth by voicing objections whenever the Emperor's name was mentioned; "a tawdry fellow," he called him, "a freemason, a yanqui-lover, a friend of the Negroes, and an imperialista." The capitan da Costa had visited the not-often-visited Islands, and so knew anyway something about them, besides the fact that they were there. (That was something. It was often reported and often denied that Nueva Andorra had once sent *La Desiderata* (formerly the *Arkansas*), under a politically-appointed and inexperienced commander, on a voyage to Brazil; asked, upon his return, how were things in Brazil, he had replied, with a shrug, "Brazil isn't there") Dr. Macvitty did not engage in much conversation, but all the while he made sketches, of the sort for which he was almost famous. And it is indeed from these sketches, and from letters to his brother Sawney (the Rev. Alexander Macvitty), that a number of the details of this voyage have been supplied.

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(The letters and sketches mostly repose in the Lord Marechal's Library and Museum in Edinburgh, to the learned Curators of which we express our thanks; their charges have been, considering inflation and rates of exchange, almost modest.)

Nevertheless, we will not bore readers—at any rate, I hope I am not boring mine—with many details. Though the South Atlantic seas can be very rough indeed, one reason no doubt why the Islas had been so seldom visited, the voyage of *La Victoria* was fairly untroubled. She anchored in the windward of Encantada Grana and several times a day people put ashore in her small boat, or "launch"; and of course the shore visits of the passengers were more frequent than those of most of the crew, who, truth to tell, were not much inclined to land on these Isles containing none of the amenities which sailors prefer to encounter whilst ashore. And a very wild and rocky shore it was, too, though little did this seem to disarrange the famous Great Tortoises.

"See these great tortoises, Your Excellency!"

"Never mind such titles, Capitan; call me simply 'Doctor'; but where are they all going? So very, very slowly?"

"Either to crunch the flesh of the prickly-pear cactus between their horny jaws, or in search of those hidden springs which they alone, mostly, know about."

Consider, then, at this time, the President of the Republic—no silk hat, no frock coat, no sash of office, no: clad in simple costume borrowed from the third mate, and with the same well-worn *sombrero de jipijapa* which he wore (almost one wishes to say, *wears*, so strong is habit!) at home, how eagerly he traverses the rocky landscape of the largest of the Islands which never before had been trodded by presidential foot; observe the slight flush of pleasure and the quick degree of impatience, he brushes aside all offers of "helping hands," and soon, with only a single guard to accompany him, he vanishes into the brush, or bush, or however one wishes to describe it; those trees of which the sound of an axe has seldom menaced, the dense thicketry, the—

"Come, follow me!" exclaims the capitan da Costa in a tone of command which never he would have used to the President himself; "I know of a short-cut, we will soon encounter them!" Everybody obeys; sure enough, a trail is found, all follow it, birds call out, the small animalitos or insectivos also appear, what glorious and one may accurately say, gorgeous, butterflies: but what care, momentarily, the visitors, save for the taciturn Dr. Macvitty, who, almost as he moves, he sketches, sketches—behold! the party has reached at last the small plantation which the pioneer settler family, those profugitives from the scurrying and unhealthy throngs of European city-dwellers, has cleared, with great labor, from the bosque: there is the Family Kielor, almost as though they

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had gathered for the purpose of welcoming the President. The father Kielor greets his civic leader with a warm handshake and an embrace, the mother Kielor leaves for a moment the home-made frame on which she embroiders, so to speak, textiles made from the wild flax with threads spun from a local fibre and dyed with local dies-stuff, representations of the autochthonous flora and fauna, and waves her hand at the great chief magistrate; several small boys of various sizes at first stand off shyly, then slowly creep forward and are greeted with paternal pats upon their heads. A delicious odor fills the air—to be specific, a "lunch" was cooking, of goatsflesh and several sorts of ñames and patatas, as well as the famous wild spinaches so good against the dreaded scurvy. After some few minutes the President says, "But I do not see here your oldest son, whom always we fondly remember by the name of *el vilvoy*, forever will we remember with what bravery he bit off the ear of that savage fellow, a foreigner I need not say, whilst defending the sweet mis Ohara, la bertita chica; where is he?"

Scarcely has [The above account, transposed from the holographic, seems rather confused: on the one hand the President has vanished into the woods with one single naval guardsman, and yet here he is described as being already present at the Kielor house and farm, with no explanation or transition. Well, we must take history as we find it, and, as the almost fabulous capitan ser Juan Smiht so aptly puts it, History without Geography is a wandering carcase, or perhaps it is the other way around; the capitan ser Juhan Esmiss, rescuer of las pocahontas, was not a literary man] scarcely has the initial burst of enthusiasm subsided sufficiently for the babble of voices to terminate for a moment, when distinctly are heard some distant shots, securely of firearms. Exclaims the elder Kielor, "That is not my son, he took with him this morning only a machete when he left to examine some traps and snares; let us go at once in that direction!" And, directly he trots off in another direction. Navy officers cry commands to their few men and they begin to run in a more direct direction; but the doctor Macvitty calls out to warn them of the dangers of the hedge of prickly-pears which they are about to charge through: of their large thorns which draw blood—and, much more dangerous, their tiny and usually at first glance unseen spines, those which break off in the flesh, and fester, causing more infection and sores of great pain, often indeed leaving scars. In a moment prevail the heads more cooler, it is realized the patriarco Kielor doubtless knows best the paths of his "own" island; if he runs off in a certain direction, doubtless it is to find a passable lane through the wilderness which will presently change its direction according to the contures of nature. (It is not to be thought that these considerations are the results of subsequent meditations.) And the reader already knows that the shots

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had been fired by certain troops of the Counter-Claimant Nation for the sovereignty of las Islas: in other words, not to cavil at the truth, the Republic of Bobadilla and Las Bonitas, as it is commonly and simply called. El B & B only in the vulgate.

When the Intelligent Semaphore on the well-sited Goat's Head Hill, overlooking la Ciudad de Ereguay and the circumjacent waters had signaled with both its arms out straight that (in other words) a sidewheel steamer was approaching—the black ball hoisted at the same moment indicating that it was one of our Naval vessels, and next went up the Presidential flag; at once a crowd began to gather at the mole, for it was realized that this meant the return of the steam Ram *La Victoria,* with the President on board. Meanwhile, of course, as the semaphore continued working while the ship drew nearer, and both were sending and transcribing messages to each other; but little heeded this the throng, most of whom naturally could not read the Semaphore letters, nor had they telescopes to see what the Ship was saying. But those who had the knowledge and the means, including of course several people in the Department of Naval Affairs; as well, naturally, one need hardly say, the journalists: they were transfixed, electrified, by what these messages implied. And as word of this spread so rapidly through the City, of course the crowd grew vast.

The Questions at the "Interview"

Q. Mr. Dr. President, is it indeed true that you had been as it were lost in the jungle on Encantada Grande and that the Vilvoy himself then rescued you?

A. With the frankness which characterizes my nature, I answer, simply, Almost I might have become alarmed, but the Vilvoy heard my calls, and fairly at once he rescued me.

Q. Ah, thank God! You seem to be in entire good health, in fact one might say, in better, is it not true?

A. Yes.

Q. And is it also true that this is because the Vilvoy led you to some medicinal springs of the sort called *spa?*

A. Perceiving that I was very hot and somewhat fatigued, he did indeed lead me to some springs in an obscure place, in which certainly I bathed. As to its medical qualities, Dr. Macvitty regrets that I did not carry away with me a sample of the spring water, but I had no thought of that. As for my health, it may be that the exercise and the sea breezes had something to do with it. But there are more important matters, and if you will excuse me, I observe that my carriage is over there, and—

Q. Ah, but sir doctor president, what of these important matters? It is true, then, that some troops of the Counter-Claimant Country, I refer

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to el B & B, had landed and were attempting an invasion? the shameless ones.

A. Yes.

At this, roars of indignation swept the crowd, and, almost immediately, the City. The survivors of the Invasion had been observed making an escape in a small bote, from which, it is adjudicated, they transferred into a larger one. Nothing more than that the coal-supplies of our Steam Vessel were limited for a return to port only, prevented the capitan da Costa from at once pursuing this estimated other vessel. But our Nation was well-satisfied that the villians had suffered a sufficient punishment in that fearlessly El Vilvoy had attacked with his machete, and, it cannot be doubted, cut off six of their heads! Effectively, how they could have resisted with their "*superior fire-power*," as it is called, save only his already-perceived famous wild bravery struck terror to their hearts, the cowards. And they fled. As to the flag which they had previously succeeded to plant on the volcanic soil of las Islas, one may behold it any day at the Museum of the National Patrimony, hours from three to four in the afternoon, a very small sur-charge is necessarily made for the benefits of Widows and Orphans. But the public may donate the dueños such gratuities they wish. What greater evidences of breach of faith is needed to condemn a neighboring nation with whom we were legally at peace for invading our quasi-paternal soils? Well could we of the Republic of Ereguay have stricken back and given then, as one says, "titt for tatd," save that the generous heart of our then Presidente doctor Gaspar de la Vara was moved to avoid any breach between two adjacent nations of this Continent; and so, after a period marked by recriminations on their part and of cold silence on our own (imagine, they accused us of Fabrication of the acCount of the Heads!), the matter has passed off and no longer espoils the cordial relations which now obtain between our two countries, brothers as we are in blood and language anyway.

But think! of this mere youth, how he fearlessly struck of the heads of sixteen necessarily much larger grown men! What an ensample for our jung people to admire! Ah how very well-founded is this leyyend of El Vilvoy de las Islas.

At this point (or perhaps at some other nearly-contemporary point) the Counter-Claimant Nation simply turned its back on the whole thing: headline in the *Cada Dia* newspaper, widely recognized as government organ: DECLARES THE KING OF SWEDEN AND NORWAY/ *The Nations of Europe Are Very Contented to Recognize That the Confederational Union of Bobadilla AND LAS BONITAS IS INDISSOLUABLE*. The King of Sweden and Norway, that civilized and civil man, was always willing to issue such declarations whenever his ministers asked

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him . . . and much it helped the union of Sweden and Norway; its effects on South American sales of canned sardines and wooden matches cannot be precisely calculated.

So far as is known, only once did El Vilvoy travel into the Interior of Ereguay . . . at least only once which is known . . . it is realized that the generosity of the vaqueros was almost an embarrassment, they incessantly surrounding and offering him many copas of Rum Dinga, their famous naive but strong drink; also constantly they surrounded his horse and soon all its tails hairs had been plucked out for souvenirs and alleged cures for the imfirmities of the male person; in these matters of "*Ffolkwisdon*," who indeed can say? And as it was seemingly impossible, if not indeed difficult, to avoid almost similar seens in the Ciudad, if thereafter for sundry times of sundry years he came to the capital and port, it would have been as incognito, slipping in and out and then away again: his arrival, departure, presence, alleged comments and appearances, almost in the popular mine and pewrhasp higher, in some essential details resembles the doctrine of Sebastianism, as within the memories of some old and still-living people one found it yet in Brazil, let alone the Question of in Portugal. But of course the mysticism or not, in essential detail this difference: El Vilvoy was not dead!*

But—

Ah, the sceptics! The sceptics, O! Of much would the sceptics have liked to dismiss entirely the matter of the Twenty-six Severed Heads as lies, old crones' tails, and propaganda . . . but little have they been able. There is, for one thing, the testimony of President Doctor Eduardo Gaspar de la Vega, and if revisionist historians would dismiss that; there was, for another thing, the testimony of the Docttor Mcvitty: was not the dr. mAc vitty the Author of a learned monograph on Certain Disorders of the Metatarsals, printed in the Journal of the National Scottish Medical Association? Little recked the ravings of the *Cada Dia* newspaper of the Ciudad de Bobadilla against the inflexible probity of the Journal of the National Scottish Medical Association (alleged activities of the dr. Alejandro Nkox and the uneducated Herr Burc are entirely beside the point). It is of course unfortunate that doctor Macvitty's renewed testimony was not available at a later date, but he had returned to his native Land, there to engage upon his life-long crusade to test and maintained the wholesome nature of Scotch whisky as compared to brandy; and died in Peebles under muffled circumstances. And there is furthermore the er-

**And one remembers with some small dismay the so-called Riots of Rosarosa, in that remote rural region, which began when someone in a cantina allegedly denied that El Vilvoy had cut off seventeen of the heads of the misfortunate invaders. Small wonders that he therafter preferred, so it seems, the shadows of bein unrecognized, to the full noontine glare of the Publicity.*

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refutable testimony of the Sketches: the Sketches, four in number, clearly show each one clearly six of the Severed Heads reposing on their ledge or ledges in the Secret Cave, and how respectful were all the parties involved to refuse to disturb their repose or even to disclose their location, merely to satisfy a rude curiosity. Or for any other reason. As for the claim that the four Sketches show the same six heads from slightly different angles, or that four times six equals twenty-four and not twenty-six—this is a mere quibble. And also remains unidentified the alleged medical spring.

It is secure that, so far as goes impartial evidence and testimony, El Vilvoy never acknowledged his heroism in this matter, merely giving a slight jesture and a «grunt» and a movement slightly of the mouth whenever asked of it. How this proves his essential Modesty, that of the Gentleman of Nature, too educated even to deny what his interlocutter has enquired.

"Well indeed," commented the Spanish Priest (in a former time not yet so very far back at all, priests did not go about in casual dress ever, and with what dignity, too!). "But it now seems quite evident that those heads had probably nothing to do with the so-called Invasion, the Las Bonitas Incursion. Scientists tell us that probably they were the heads (if they existed at all) of pre-Columbian Indians, there on the Islands for mysterious and uncertain reasons." And it is true that the Heads appear to be entire heads, unlike those prepared by the Jivaro Indians rather on the principle of a stuffed olive: this the priest conceded. Then he said, "But modern science has determined that organic matter stored, so to speak, well within a cave at the well-known and naturally-maintained 'Cave Temperature,' cool but not freezing-cold, well may last forever in its original form. Witness," he said, "the hide of the megatherium in Patagonia, and the deposits of sloth-dung in the cave in North America.

—The Vilvoy led the president and Dr. Macvitty to the cave where the heads were? Well, perhaps he did, but that in no way proves that he had put the heads there, let alone removed them from the shoulders of the soldiers of Las Bonitas." The others there in the garden of la Villa de Murphy, moved just a bit restively at this statement, but perhaps all were too polite to dispute, or even to deny. The rural-looking young man said nothing; he seemed, if anything, politely a bit bored. Whiffs of memory, like faint scents of some aromatic plant growing not within sight, began to be perceived by me. Had he been, perhaps, the man with the gun and the game-bag, who had nodded to us from the berm of the road near the forest as we slowed down to avoid a mud rut? I could not be sure. Or was he one of a couple of people considering a bogged-down piece of equipment in a field just before we stopped for water?

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"Perhaps, sir, you will give us your opinion," suggested Licenciado Huebner, politely.

The young man seemed to consider the question for a second, then he said, very calmly and equitably, "No."

And as though the attorney had asked *her*: "To me," said la doctora, after a moment, "the evidence upon the shell of the great tortuga is a most remarkable thing." There was a murmur of agreement; and, seeing that I knew nothing of these things, two or three people recapitulated for me a conversation back there on Great Enchanted Island. Imagine! they directed me; imagine that black soil composed of volcanic origins ground so very fine, and the black rocks scattered around, almost a terrain of the inferno; here and there, going infinitesimally slowly, the giant tortoises, moving their flipper-like legs and making so little distance with each step that one might walk alongside them as they did so. And in fact, walking exactly so, is President E. Gaspar de la Vara, and so is capitan da Costa. One points out to the other curious and atypical markings on the giant carapace of one huge crawler. "¡Mira. *MAP* and *VYP!* Are these not the initials of the explorer-brothers Martin Alfonso and Vicente Yañez Pinzon?"

"Indeed, indeed! What else? And examine this set carved on the other side!"

"JPdL. Juan Ponce de Leon! Ah, that great pilot; señores, we are in the presence of history!"

And of those there in the garden of the villa in that suburb of that southern South American city, several look directly at the young priest to see if he is not impressed. "Why," he asks, "should I doubt that they saw such initials? And why should I not doubt that they saw what had been put there by hoaxers, or shall we say, 'jokers'? Giant tortoises may live long, but—*that* long? On Santa Elena there is a great tortoise, said to have been there in the time of Bonaparte. *Said.* And on Tonga, in the Pacific, there is another one, said to have been brought there by capitan Cooke. *Said.* Humanity continues to divert itself with fables, and meanwhile it continues, largely, to refuse to accept the truth. Therefore we all suffer." He said this with a certain intensity, low-keyed but emphatic.

Said the attorney, dressed in that meticulous black and white, "But . . . Father Juan . . . it does not follow does it, that because we believe that certain tortoises may live to be old, very very old, surely it does not follow that we deny the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church?" And the young priest answered, slowly, almost I would say, reluctantly, that, No, it did not follow.

But although El Vilvoy made no further, as it were, public appearances in the Capital and Port, he continued to be seen from time to time by

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visitors from there to his almost-native Island (after all, he had been very young and small when his parents made their landing). From time to time parties of such visitors, it depended always upon the weather, at least, and sometimes also upon other conditions—in time of prosperity perhaps a bit more often, in times of civil unrest certainly somewhat less often; parties of visitors would make what one might call a cruise, one might call it an excursion. Few indeed made the trip, which had to be made by foot, all the way from the shore to the farm. For one thing it was not easy, for another it was known that the senior Kielors did not favor such visitations, interruptive of their private schedules and their private peace; also they said that visitors brought colds. It became the custom for one of the landing parties to fire three shots when they had landed. And, eventually, usually while they were eating their picnic lunches, silently out of the wilderness there would appear upon the upper edges of the shore, *El Vilvoy*. What exclamations! What risings to the feet. What, one might say, clamors. Cheers! And always, always . . . or anyway, usually, or at any rate: often . . . someone would level a camera.

"Ah, Toño," the skipper would say, casually (imagine speaking *casually* to someone so remarkable.); "Toño, here are the things ordered by your Papa. [aside] Here, you, fellow, pile them well back from the tideline."

And so on.

Sometimes, as the visitors were returning to whichever small ship by row-boat or by motor-launch, sometimes they looked back, El Vilvoy raised a hand in farewell, abruptly let it fall. What a waving of handkerchiefs! What cries of *Luego, Vilvoy!* et cetera.

But when they looked back again, always he was gone.

Full-page spread in La Voz. Headline: El Vilvoy, Does His Natural Life Keep Him Youthful? Is it his total revulsion of the semi-artificial foods of the civilized living which maintains the Vilvoy in his youthfulness? Is it the conditions so devoid of stress or pressure, in complete harmony with the rhythms of the tides and the cycles of the Nature, which is preventing him from showing the signs of inevitable decay? Has his metabolism thus been slowed? Is he indeed, so to speak, *un pieter-pan*? Let us regard these incontestable photographical evidences . . . And there they were, each captioned with the names of the photographer and the date of the photograph, an entire series of pictures of el vilvoy, over a period of I forget how many years, numbers do not settle well in my mind. Sometimes his hair was a little shorter and sometimes a little longer, sometimes he was wearing such and such a garment, sometimes another: but always, always, not "usually" but always, really, the same face. And it did not really seem that he was any older in the last one than in the first one.

"I believe that it is the fruitarian diet," said la doctora, emphasizing

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that this was her opinion, with slow, deep nods of her handsome head. "I have known really remarkable results to occur with the fruitarian diet. I would observe it myself, but my family will not allow."

But the other señora, señora Alvarado? was of a different opinion. "It is because he knows of a certain yerba which grows in a hidden vale there on that island, or, some say, on another of those Islands. Twice a year he goes there, secretly, and he eats that secret yerba. And it purifies his blood. Once in January and once in June he purifies his blood with the substance of this secret yerba. And it is that which prevents him from the aging."

Mrs. Phlux said, "How very selfish of him. I am sure that we would all *love* to know the name of this herb! Why *don't* we?"

Said the señora, "Because it is a secret one." She said this very mildly, conscious of no artifice herself, and she nodded two or three times, not very deeply but somewhat less than rapidly. Clearly, to her, that was all the explanation needed.

Said the Spanish priest, "Old Padre Lizarraga, of the Botanical Gardens," everyone nodded at this reference; afterwards I learned that it was not that they all knew Padre Lizarraga, but that they all knew the Botanical Gardens. Or knew *of* the Botanical Gardens. "Told me that he had spent forty years investigating the native herbal medicaments, so often said to be so good for this ailment and for that; and the result of his studies was that he found that ninety-five percent of them were purgatives."

I felt that he expected that this statement would make some certain effect, but none was visible. Only the usual polite nods. After a moment, he went on. "Surely we have all heard of the Deception Theory?" And the attorney said, "The malice of the press of Las Bonitas is almost beyond belief. Conceive with what effort this theory must have been compounded."

So now I heard, if only in faintly greater detail, for the first time more about Old Kielor's other sons than the sole fact of their existing. Old Kielor's sons had been named, one after the other: Washington, Bonaparte, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Masaryk . . . called informally, Tony, Bony, Sony, Cony, and Max. Either History had ceased to supply Old Kielor with Immense Liberator Figures, or Time had changed the angle of the telescope. Or else Old Kielor had been simply consistent, and it was we who had underestimated Masaryk. And the Deception Theory was, simply, that the entire Kielor family (prompted, so it was implied, by the government of Ereguay) had conspired to deceive the visitors to las encantadas by replacing each brother, as he grew older, with the next youngest brother. That is, the tourists or trippers, the visitors, had only seen the real Tony for an unnamed period of time; after that, the one

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who came down to the shoreline and was photographed would have been Bony. And, when *his* own inevitable maturity would have become obvious, the one who was introduced as El Vilvoy was actually Sony. And so on, down through Cony and Max.

And here one heard certain other variations in the conventional legend. Bony would make a patriotic speech. Cony performed a certain dance, presumably of his own invention. Sony would hang from a branch of a tree by the shoreline and swing back and forth. Max brandished a machete and demanded assurance that the party was really from Ereguay, and not las Bonitas.

Mostly I had just looked and listened. Now I asked a question. Had any one here ever been to Grand Encantada?

"But one does not go there anymore," said the señora whose husband was un burócrata. "Because it is uncomfortable the voyage, and on the Island there is no retrete, and nowadays one has the cinema."

The youthful stranger had rolled himself dexterously a cigarette in what looked like a leaf of pale tobacco, and now he lit it and sat forward in his chair, watching the smoke. It was not rank, merely somewhat strange. I thought that perhaps it reminded me of the small puro being smoked by the man, his face I did not see, who had brought the side of venison to the ristorante where Diego and I had eaten the morning before our arrival in the Ciudad. Only, perhaps I did see his face.

—But when had these visitations left off? Opinion was divided. And how many years had separated the brothers Kielor one from the other? No one had any idea. There were, however, any number of ideas involving such reference-points as the Revolution of the Year of Drought, and the Interim Presidency of the Very Sad Leap Year, and the Battle of Apostolo Santiago: events clearly as significant to those others present as The Bonus March or Pearl Harbor was to me; but of which we, all of us in the Northern Continent, were but utterly ignorant. Every Latin American republic has its own Alamo, its own Gettysburg, and we have never heard of any one of them. Nearer to us than to Ereguay is a country once convulsed by a great civil war during a period which we remember chiefly for the wearing of sleeve-garters, and funny female hats.

It was, however, where I now tarried, absolutely a matter of national belief that on the Islas Encantadas lived *El Vilvoy*, who had (a) come to the rescue of an innocent young girl, daughter of a national hero, who was once menaced by a thug; he immediately bit off the thug's ear, thus causing him to flee into the night with his bleeding ear in one hand; (b) this same wild but inestimably praiseworthy young vilvoy had upon a subsequent occasion rescued none other but the President of the Republic from a gang of invaders intent upon depriving Ereguay of the sovereignty

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of the Islands, and (c) had cut off the heads of twenty-seven of them and hidden the heads in a cave; and (d) he—

Mrs. Phlux said, "In a way it rather reminds me of Arthur and the Land of Avalon, or of Barbarossa in his cavern asleep with his beard still growing . . . and, of course, of poor young King Sebastian, who didn't really die in battle five hundred years ago was it? and will of course some day return. My. I do rather like it."

The priest, Padre Juan, had taken up his cup of chocolate, and now he put it down again. "We have all heard," he said, "of something which was done in another country, which should not have been done," and again he took his cup, and again he put it down. And it seemed that there was now a bit more interest displayed; could it be that people had been just a bit restive at hearing their own legend put down, and were now pleased to be hearing of some other nation being blamed for . . . for what? "I refer," said the priest, "to the Julio Castillano forgeries." People *were* being, definitely, more interested. *I* was certainly even more interested, for I had never heard of the matter.

"What was that?" I asked. Julio Castillano, it was explained to me, had been a well-known journalist in Nueva Andorra; perhaps he was at least as well known for his candid camera as for his candid commentaries. And in a celebrated series of news articles he had supplied, I did not learn exactly how many photographs, of a Leading Political Figure in the company of a Leading Theatrical Artiste who was not his lawful (or even unlawful) wife. To make the matter very short, if not indeed curt: the photographs were revealed, exposed as we might say, as forgeries, hoaxes . . . of a sort . . . that is, they had all been taken of the two people involved in entirely different pictures, and the clever scoundrel had somehow joined the two together. Indeed, there was no real evidence that they had ever *been* together at any time in any place. Sought by the law and by the outraged husband of the Leading Theatrical Artiste, Julio Castillano had fled the country for another: and there he had shot himself.

"What do you suggest, then, Father?" the attorney asked. "That the photographs showing the vilvoy were all hoaxes? In what way?"

Padre Juan hesitated for a moment. "What proof do we have," he asked, "that all or most of those pictures had not been taken in the course of, say, one or two years? with fictitious date subsequently ascribed to them? Or what proof do we have that the dates may have not been let us say confused?"

Asked la doctora, "But what proof do we have that they were?"

It was, he said, a deduction, a theory, not an accusation. The press was almost everywhere of a sensationalist tendency, ready to manufacture exciting news when that happened to be in short supply. It would not have been difficult to assemble a collection of photographs and to mis-

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ascribe, or even to confuse, their dates. "Thus gratifying," he said, "the jaded tastes of a public unnaturally eager for, always, more novelty and more and more novelty. Even when it involves an interference in the natural law, whereby all men are mortal, and whereby all who live an age must become aged."

The attorney made a gesture which foretold a comment, then for a moment he withheld his comment. Then he said, "I believe, reverend sir, that you wish to remind us that the Church cautions us against accepting a miraculous explanation for anything as long as a mundane explanation is acceptable." He did not put it in the form of a question.

And the priest slowly nodded his agreement that this was, indeed, just what he meant. A murmur was heard, as that of several people all saying *Mmmm* at once.

While the latter part of the conversation had been going on I was aware of a figure walking very slowly around the other end of the gardens (it was a large garden and might very well have rightfully deserved the plural form), but this had not been in the forefront of my mind. Presently the figure came gradually nearer, and I saw that it was an old woman. Whoever said that in passing through life (or however does it go?), be sure to pause and smell the roses, would have been pleased with this elderly person. Stopping, stooping, bending her face to the blossoms, almost she seemed to be stroking the plants; and perhaps she was. "What a shame you had not been here even a few years ago," the attorney said to me. "You would have been able to meet the former President Gaspar de la Vara, who was tragically killed whilst driving his motor car, when he was ninety-six." And the señora said, "Ninety-seven."

Slowly the woman drew nearer, then slowly she wandered on away. Eventually I formed the thought, and leaned over and asked my host, "Who is that?" and I gestured. It was a small gesture.

He gave her only the slightest of glances, smiled (so it seemed, fondly), and then he said to me, "That is my great-aunt Bertha. She never goes out, and socially she sees almost no one." Scarcely had I engaged this answer to my question than another question formed, for the young—as I had thought, hunter or farmer, perhaps—who had, save for occasionally touching his very slight moustache, and smoking his cigarette, hardly moved; he had gotten up and, walking through the lower part of the garden, had come face to face with the old woman. She looked up as he stood before her, and then in a rush she held out her hands, and he took them. "Oh, Tony!" she cried. "Oh, Tony! You never grow old!" ●

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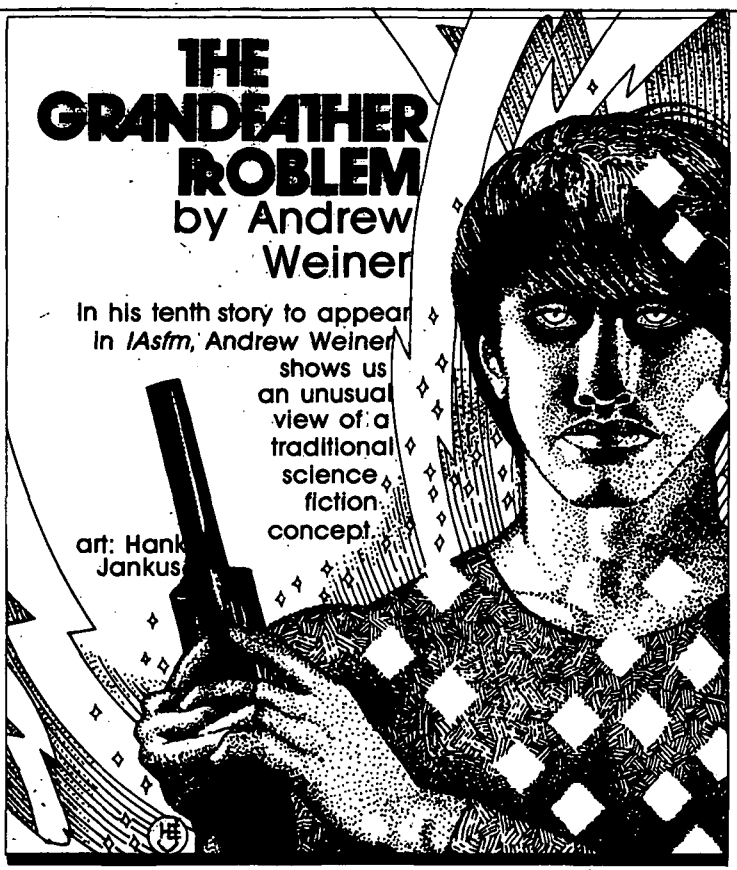
THE GRANDFATHER PROBLEM
by Andrew Weiner
In his tenth story to appear in IAsfm, Andrew Weiner shows us an unusual view of a traditional science fiction concept.
art: Hank Jankus

1.

Well, here I am, in the *stetl*, gun in hand. Lurking in the alleyway, waiting to kill my grandfather. My *zeder*.

Not that I have anything against the old man, you understand. Actually I hardly knew him, I was only six or seven years old when he died. I dimly recall the tiny grimy house where he lived with my *boobah*, the house where my father and his brothers and sisters had grown up. It was a tenement really, squeezed into a row of similar houses, no bathroom at all and the toilet out in the diminutive backyard where they kept the chickens. It's gone now, demolished, paved over with public housing a few years after my grandfather's death, his real death, or at least his first one.

He was a tailor, my grandfather, an honest-to-god little tailor, first in the *stetl* and afterwards in the new country. My father was a tailor, too, although somewhat taller, and for a better clientele. And I myself am

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a physicist, such is the nature of cultural assimilation and accommodation.

I should introduce myself. My name is Harold Levett. My grandfather's name was Avram Levi. And I am going to kill him.

We would visit him, my grandfather, in his tiny tenement house, making the long trek out from our suburban home. And, always, he would want to take me to the barber, an aspect of these visits that I dreaded. I never liked going to the barber, and I especially disliked the old-time barbers in my grandfather's neighborhood, with their long cut-throat razors that they would sharpen on a leather strap and use to trim the back of your neck.

But other than that, I have nothing against the old man at all, there is really no personal malice whatsoever in what I must do now, it is all strictly in the spirit of scientific inquiry.

Of course, he is not an old man back here but a young one, younger even than me. Small and vigorous in his motions as he walks unsuspecting down the alleyway towards me, he looks nothing like my father, who is as yet not even a gleam in his eye and will now never become one.

Why must I kill him? Surely it is evident. I must kill him to solve the grandfather problem.

2.

"You're wasting your time," my colleagues would tell me. "Time travel is impossible, philosophically impossible."

Surely you are familiar with the argument: If it was possible for me to travel in time then I could kill my own grandfather and as a result would never be born to travel in time and kill my grandfather . . .

"But why would I *want* to kill my grandfather?"

"You might do so by accident," my colleagues would say. "If enough people traveled in time, someone would do so sooner or later, accidentally or deliberately. That would be a paradox, and therefore impossible."

And yet they were wrong, my colleagues. For it *is* possible to travel in time. I have already proved it. And now I will solve this absurd grandfather problem.

3.

I step out of the shadows and raise the gun. I fire directly at my grandfather's chest. It makes a large wound, which bleeds profusely. And yet he still stands, glaring at me. I fire again and again.

"Asshole!" he shouts, in clear though heavily accented English, a language he will not learn for another fifteen years. "Jerk! Schmuck! I should have got the barber to cut off your prick."

"You don't speak English," I say.

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"I went to the Berlitz in Warsaw, what do you think?" He brushes at the bullet wounds in his chest, which are healing up even as he speaks. "Asshole! Your father was nothing to write home about, but *you* . . ."

"You're dead," I say. "I killed you. I traveled back in time and I killed you."

"No, you didn't," he says. "Asshole. Time travel is impossible. Can't you get that through your head? And as for trying to kill your own grandfather . . ."

"It's nothing personal," I say. "It's strictly a scientific question . . ."

"Always with the grandfathers," he says. "Always us. Tell me, Mr. Big Time Scientist, what's this fixation with knocking off your *zeder?* Why not just your father? Why not? Same result, after all."

"I didn't . . ."

"You didn't think of it," he says. "And you know why not? Because it's too close to the bone. Oh, Oedipus, Oedipus! Haven't you learned anything from Freud? You want to kill your father, not your grandfather. That's the reason for this whole time travel rigmarole, but you can't face up to it. So you transfer it to your grandfather instead."

"Now look," I say. "I've had my problems with my father, sure. Who hasn't? But nothing that would make me want to . . ."

I stop to think for a moment.

"Wait a minute," I say. "You're a little tailor in a *stetl* in the year 1905. What do you know about Freud?"

"They teach it at the Berlitz," he says. "Now, get out of my way, I got to measure someone for a suit."

"This is a set-up," I say. "You're not my grandfather. I bet you're an agent of the time patrol, sent here to convince me I'm nuts."

"No," he says. "You're crazy, all right. There's no question about that. Now get out of my way."

4.

In a daze I pull the lever on my belt that will reverse the tachyon field. I feel myself falling, down through the years, back to my laboratory.

Except that when I cease falling I am lying in a bed in a white-painted room, and a man in a white coat is staring down at me.

"Ah, Mr. Levett," he says. "I see you're back with us. How did it go? Did you enjoy your little chat with your grandfather?"

I shake my head, as if to clear it. Memories begin to trickle back.

"I had a breakdown," I say.

"Yes," says the doctor. "You became obsessed with traveling in time. You neglected your work, your fiancé, your friends. Finally you withdrew from the world entirely. But we've brought you back now."

"How?" I ask. "It all seemed so real."

"Hypnosis. By giving substance to your obsession, we hoped to provide

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you with some insight into your behavior."

"Yes," I say. "You're right. I see it now. I was mad. Completely mad. Time travel is impossible."

"Well," the doctor says. "I suggest you get some rest now."

5.

I close my eyes, but sleep does not come.

I reach for the glass of water on my night table, but I never pick it up. A young man wearing a purple jumpsuit pops into the room out of nowhere. He is holding a strange object in his right hand, which he points at me like a gun.

"I'm sorry to have to do this, dad," he says. "It isn't personal."

"Come on," I say. "It's a good gag and everything, but it isn't necessary, you know. I'm convinced. Anyway, I've had enough for one day."

"I'm here to kill you, dad," he says. "I've come a long way to do it and I'm going to do it. But like I say, it isn't personal. In some ways you were an okay father."

"Bullshit it isn't personal," I say, irritated now. The kid is a real schmuck, even if he is a chip off the old block. "And if we're going to do this number, whatever happened to killing grandpa?"

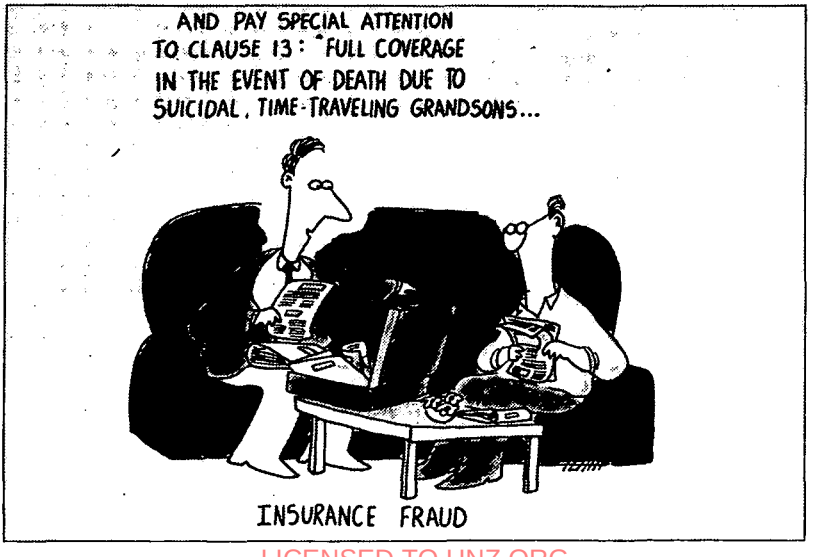
He shrugs. "This is simpler," he says.

"Hostile little punk," I say. "Forget it, anyway. Time travel is impossible."

"You say." He waves the device at me.

"Wait a minute," I say. "Can we talk about this?"

And then a burst of orange light hurtles towards me. ●


AND PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION
TO CLAUSE 13: "FULL COVERAGE
IN THE EVENT OF DEATH DUE TO
SUICIDAL, TIME-TRAVELING GRANDSONS...
INSURANCE FRAUD

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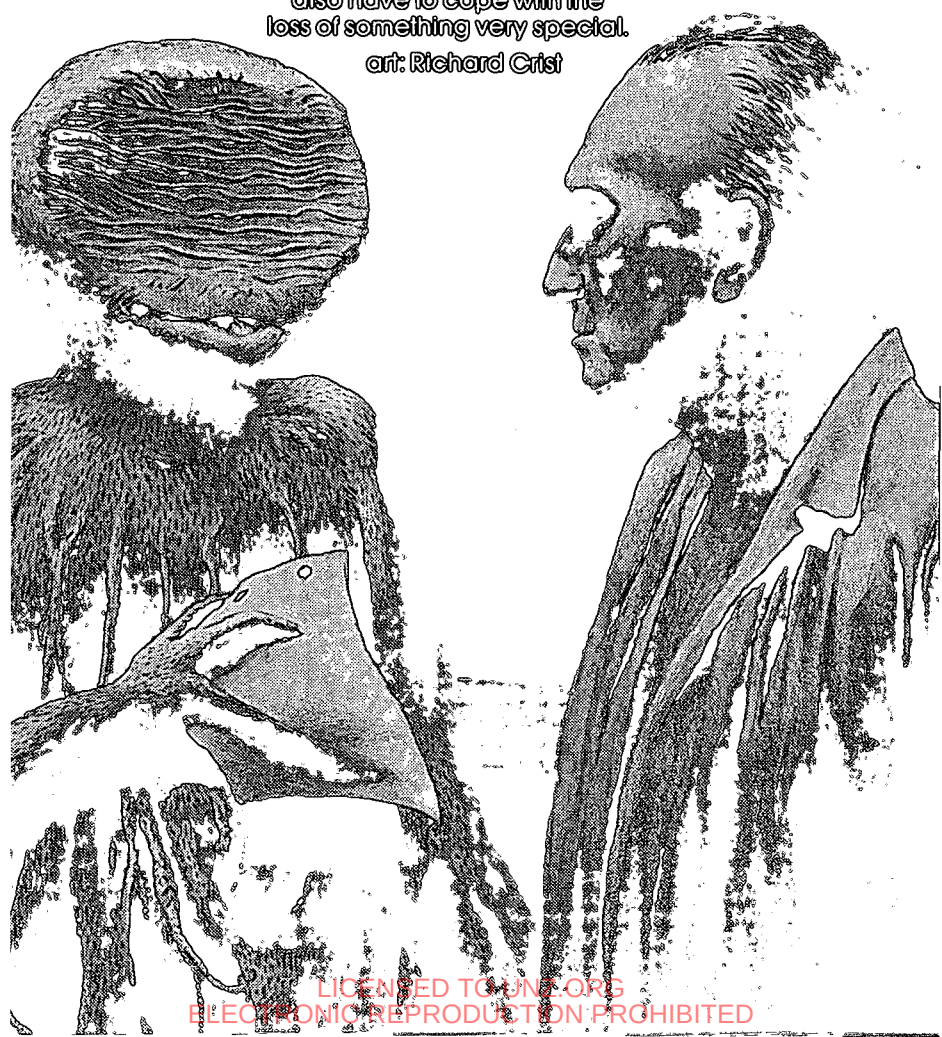
THE COLOR WINTER

by Steven Popkes

The immigrant may find much to be thankful for in a new land, but he or she may also have to cope with the loss of something very special.

art: Richard Crist



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The air smelled of whiskey, tobacco, and rain.

He stood on the top level of the parking garage, smoking one foul African cigarette after another and drinking from a bottle with a starry label. The rain had already soaked through his jacket. Rivulets ran down his back, his shoulders. It was not a warm rain, but a rain of mid-November: gusty, brittle, cold.

"I am Harry Linden," he shouted into the wind. "I am eighty years old. I am wet." He chuckled. "I will die of pneumonia, maybe." He laughed outright and drank from the bottle.

The laugh turned into a cough, and for a long minute he couldn't get his breath. The cough faded, and he drained the bottle and threw it to the street. The sound of shattering glass was lost in the rain.

The office of the Stuart Street Parking Garage was placed at the corner of Stuart Street and Berkeley Street in downtown Boston. Two sides were made of glass to allow the owner—Harry—to watch the street, the cars entering and leaving, and the person in the ticket booth taking money.

He barely glanced in the booth at Jasper as he entered the office. The chair in the office creaked and he looked up. "Sasha?" he asked.

"I was down here for the doctor anyway," she said. She was a big, craggy mountain of a woman. Harry saw new valleys and fissures made when she shifted her weight. A woman of twenty or so played with the hem of Sasha's dress. Her face was wide and her eyes slanted, her fingers stubby and thick. "You should watch Jasper," Sasha continued. "Keep an eye on him. He could take you for a whole day's profits." She stared at him accusingly. "Harry Linden, you are eighty years old and you are wet clear through. You could die of pneumonia."

"Sasha." He smiled and kissed her forehead. He stroked the younger woman's head. "And Margaret. What did the doctor say?"

Margaret smiled and covered her face with her hands, peeking out between her fingers.

"Wet." Sasha shook her finger at him. "And smelling of whiskey."

He nodded and hung up his jacket in the corner. The dripping blended with the steam hiss of the radiator.

"You listen to me about Jasper. You must watch him."

Harry looked through the window towards the booth. Jasper stood still, staring at nothing, waiting for a car to come. The garage was silent but for the rain. Jasper was bald all over. His chest and upper abdomen hung on him like empty sacks, wrinkled and covered with something not quite hair, not quite feathers. If it weren't for the dish-shaped skin where his eyes should have been, he might have looked like an old bum wearing empty sacks. As it was, the ridges and wrinkles under his skin and across

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his body made no sense to Harry. But, Harry reasoned, Jasper is an alien. How should you understand him?

"Jasper will steal nothing. How is Margaret?" Margaret looked up at him at the mention of her name and smiled again. Harry and Sasha had had a daughter, Barbara. She had never married and when she was thirty-seven she had come home pregnant and silent. Two years after Margaret was born, Barbara died driving to work on a gray snowy morning when the Harvard Bridge collapsed into the Charles River. She had been a melancholy, practical child; a strong, self-willed woman who smiled little. Barbara was born the year Germany had invaded Poland and died the year R'rched the Rigellian crashed in Boston harbor: when things changed, Harry thought. As he looked at Margaret, he saw Barbara's features overlaid by Down's Syndrome. With all of that arrayed behind you, how is it you are so happy? Harry shook his head.

Sasha shrugged. "Bronchitis. Heart murmur. It is the same, or only a little worse."

"That is a small victory, anyway."

Margaret buried her face in the folds of Sasha's dress. She giggled.

Jasper had come that summer. Thus:

Harry looked up and saw him standing silently outside the glass door. Harry had only looked up to see if Sasha and Margaret were coming down the street to have lunch. He made a kind of squeak of alarm.

The alien did not move.

Harry was startled but not surprised. All week he had been hearing of interstellar refugees coming from some far depression or war or something else the television would not describe clearly. He had already seen a few of them on the Boston streets.

He opened the door. "How—" His voice squeaked again. He cleared his throat and tried once more. "How do you do. Can I help you?" You're a diplomat now, Harry?, he thought. Butter would not melt in your mouth.

"The name Jasper has been assigned to me. I am seeking employment," the alien said in a bass whisper. "I was told at the R'rched Center there might be some at locations such as this."

Harry shrugged. "Not here. I don't have much. Try the Rieken System lots down the street."

"Rieken System?" Jasper produced a phrase book and searched it.

Harry chuckled. "Yah. They own most of the garages around here. Except mine."

"I do not understand. I am in need of currency. My country is invaded and my . . . " He searched the phrase book again. "Fimily. My fimily starves."

Harry nodded. "Yes. I understand. Try the Rieken System."

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"Please. You must help me."

"Goddamn it!" Harry breathed deeply. Alien, he muttered to himself. "Try the—"

"I work cheaply. I work hard and honestly. I do not sleep and need only a small place to stay, but if you do not have that I am told I may stay at the R'rched Center. If I do not find work soon I will be deported and my . . . fimily will be liable for my return passage."

Harry was silent a moment, remembering the long nightmare run from Poland to America. "I haven't got much to give you."

"Much I do not need. Only a little."

He stared at Jasper guiltily. Just what is right here? "I—No. I must feed my own."

Sasha and Margaret came into the garage. Sasha looked over the alien, then questioned Harry with her eyes. He shrugged.

Margaret took the alien's hand.

"Yes?" said Jasper.

"I'm Margaret," she said and gave a bubbling laugh. She rubbed her cheek against his hand. "Soft."

The alien was silent a moment. "I have been assigned—" He stopped, seemed to consider her for a long time. "I am Jasper."

At that moment, Harry changed his mind.

All of them lived in a small house in Brighton, a dingy, broken-asphalt subsection of Boston. Jasper slept on the back porch, where they had put in a sink and curtains. Harry deducted a small rent from Jasper's wages and felt guilty. Jasper did not complain.

It was close to dawn, now, and Harry sat listening to the sirens and the pre-morning birds. The rain had stopped and the city still felt hushed. Darkness made the shapes and shadows of things grow twisted and strange. A 1934 Luger he had found in the Spanish Civil War glinted an electric blue from the street light's glare. A pair of silver candlesticks left shadows as crooked as thumbs. Next to them was a high-domed fireman's helmet, the insignia written in Polish.

Sasha and Margaret were still in bed. Often, he prowled like this, to wander the house and listen. He looked in on Margaret, her flat face relaxed in sleep. Sasha lay still, and he could not tell if she slept or not.

He heard a noise from the kitchen, a gentle tapping or scratching. Feeling his way through the shadows, he came to the back door. The noise came from there. "Damn," he muttered. He glanced at a calendar but couldn't see the date. It didn't matter. He knew the date from the sounds at the door. It was the full moon of the month: Jasper's payday. "Go away," he said. "I ain't got the money to pay you." The scratching continued. Harry opened the door.

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Jasper stood outside, pelt or feathers or skin moonlit and silver. "Mister Linden?"

"Yah?"

"I wish to talk about my wages."

Harry nodded and moved aside to let Jasper in. Mechanically, he followed Jasper down the hall to his desk and began to bring out the checkbook.

"We do not need that tonight, Mister Linden."

Harry looked down and tried to read Jasper's face. It was still, wide and noseless, broad stretches of wrinkled skin where there should have been eyes. "Why not?"

Jasper brought out stubs of paper from within the wrinkled sacks hanging from his body. Harry couldn't quite see where, and wasn't sure he wanted to know. "Here, Mister Linden."

Harry took them. They were the checks he had given Jasper. "There's three months wages here, Jasper. What did you live on?"

"I would like you to hold my wages for me. To be sent home when I die."

Harry sat down. "Die?" I'm too damned old. I don't understand. I just don't understand.

"Yes."

Harry waited, then sighed. "Are you going to die?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Not less than three years from now, I think. But not more than five. Your planet poisons me."

"Then why don't you go home?"

Jasper was motionless for a moment. "I do not understand," he said finally.

"If our planet is killing you, why should you stay?"

"To make money. To send it home."

"Even if you die?"

"Of course."

Harry laughed softly. "Why not take the money home yourself?"

"When I returned there would be no money left. The return passage would require most of it."

Harry shrugged. "You want *me* to keep the money?"

"Yes."

"What do I do when you die?"

"Send it here." From another indefinite place on his person, Jasper brought out a leaf of notebook paper. The page was filled with closely written characters and numbers.

Harry couldn't make any sense of it. "What is this?"

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"It's an address. Take it to the R'rched Center with my money and they will send it home."

He thrust it back towards Jasper. "Let them keep your death money."

"They cannot."

"Why not?"

"They do not employ me."

"What?"

"They do not employ me."

"I don't understand." Harry shook his head.

"It is important."

Harry looked at him, then the checks. He shrugged. At least he wouldn't have to come up with Jasper's check every month. "Okay."

Jasper put the checks on the desk, turned and walked out through the kitchen.

"Don't you even say thanks?" Harry yelled after him.

Jasper disappeared through the door.

The Rieken System had sprung full blown from the mind of a nameless Harvard MBA graduate working for Gulf and Western. It owned most of the parking space in Boston and all of the really successful lots. Harry had only been able to buy the Stuart Street Garage by a fluke years before. The Rieken System, benign in its monopoly, had left him alone.

They called him that fall.

"Mister Linden?"

"Yah?" He wondered which of his creditors he was talking to this time.

"My name is Proong. Randar Proong. I represent the Rieken System."

Harry sat up. This is it, he thought. His mouth grew dry. His stomach clenched. *They'll squeeze me out*, part of him said. No, he replied. I can sell. And cover Margaret's medical bills? You barely do that now. Maybe. I can make breathing space. Maybe I can make some real money. Fears and hopes born in Poland and thought long dead now came back to life.

"Yah?"

"I'd like to meet with you. Lunch, perhaps. Or dinner. What time is convenient?"

He held his voice low, noncommittal, nervous. "What do you want?"

"It's better to talk face to face. Dinner on Tuesday would be good for me. How does that sound?"

He felt confused, flustered, excited, demoralized. "Tuesday?"

"Sevenish? At the Copley? I could come over to the garage and pick you up."

What the hell? This isn't Poland, remember that. "Yah. Okay. Tuesday."

"See you then."

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* * *

The garage schedule went like this: Jasper opened at five AM and worked until closing—about midnight. He claimed he needed no sleep and wanted to work the hours. It meant more money he could send to his "fimily." Harry came in about noon and worked until they closed the garage and went home. Over the years before Jasper came, Sasha, Margaret, and Harry's life had skewed later and later, until for them evening began at midnight. Sasha regularly went to sleep at three. Harry would also sleep then, when he wasn't prowling. Jasper's coming had given them back their mornings.

Their living room was a pale yellow oblong of light; lamps hung from the ceilings, the mantelpiece, stood on end tables, on small stools. Tall lamps stood next to the chairs. Sasha had a passion for light.

Sitting in a pool of brightness, Harry chewed over the conversation with Proong. It was short. It was polite. It was noncommittal. It was just exactly the kind of conversation he could imagine some minion of Rieken having with a prospective victim. He had not told Sasha of the call, and watched her and Jasper and Margaret with the morose satisfaction of the truly depressed.

Margaret slapped at Jasper playfully, clumsily tried to tickle him. This seemed to alarm Jasper, and he backed quickly away, spreading the wrinkled sacks on his upper body into a strange umbrella-like arrangement from under his arms. It was twice as wide as he was, and iridescent as butterfly wings or the throat feathers of blackbirds. Margaret watched, laughed, and clapped her hands.

"Pretty. What is it?"

Jasper relaxed and sat on the floor across from Margaret. They make a world, the two of them, Harry thought. Jasper leaned towards her so that she could see it easily. It shone with deep purples and blacks. "It's my . . . " He stopped for a long time. "My pocket. I can breathe here. Or eat as you do with your mouth."

"Eat what?"

"I do not know the word. What falls from the sky? In the color winter? When water is mostly ice."

"Snow, Jasper," Sasha said suddenly. She turned off the television. "It's called snow."

"Snow, then. We breathe it in here. All colors of it: red, green, lavender. It is what nourishes us most of all. The world poisons us without it."

Harry suddenly felt the words were aimed at him. "Snow is white here, Jasper."

"I know. I saw pictures before I left."

What will you do with Margaret if you sell?

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I'll take better care of her, he thought. I could get her better doctors.

She cannot be cured. What else can you give her?

He shrugged and looked outside the office. The wind was blustery and cold, ripping between the Hancock Building and the garage in a long moaning howl.

What will you do with Jasper?

He'll be okay. The R'rched people will take care of him.

You took his money. His death money. Where is it?

He squirmed. I'll give it to him when the time comes.

Where is it *now*?

You know where it is. It's in doctor bills for Margaret. It's in a new pair of bifocals for Sasha. It's in the last month's mortgage payment on the garage.

"Mister Linden?"

"What?" He half stood and turned, saw Jasper and eased slowly down. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It is cold in the booth. May I come in here for a few minutes?"

God. It must have been near zero outside. Rain and cold, all winter. Nothing in between.

"Yah," he said. "Aren't any cars coming anyway."

Jasper closed the door and stood silently. After a while, this made Harry nervous. "You need anything?"

"No, sir. I am warming now."

"Yah. Yah." He nodded. "You do that."

The silence fell again. To Harry, the world became soundless, anechoic, and dumb. He felt pressured, embarrassed, needy—silence was only something he wanted to fill. "Jasper," he said as quick as a shout. "So. I don't know enough about you. So. Where are you really from?"

"A long way from here."

"I know *that*, for God's sake. I mean, what was it *like*? What were *you* like there?"

Jasper did not move or say anything for a long moment. "I would like not to talk about that."

"How come?"

"I would like not to talk about that either. It is enough that I am here. It is enough that I will send them money . . . later. It is enough that I come to a place that—" He stopped. He shuddered in a quick convulsion as a dog or a mink might shake off water. "I would like not to talk about that. Who are *you*, Mister Linden?"

Harry stared at Jasper. "Can you drink?"

"Just as you. We are metabolically similar."

"No. I mean, can you drink alcohol?"

"Probably not. Do not let me stop you."

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Harry pulled out the bottle in the desk and swallowed hard, then easy as the fire came into his gut. "Yah," he said finally.

"Who are you?" said the alien.

"Harry Linden. Eighty years old. Destined for pneumonia. At least, that's what Sasha tells me." He shook his head, smiled. "You know how we met?" He rushed on, not waiting for Jasper's reply. "I was a fireman in Krakow when I was a young man. Very young, you understand. Not yet twenty." He chuckled. "It was an honorable profession. Strong. Purposeful. Fearless. You must be all of these." He laughed. "So we were sometimes weak and our bowels turned to water. Still, we knew what needed to be done and did it. There are no small victories in such a job. Every task is important. Life-threatening. Clear."

Harry swallowed again. "She was watching the fire engines. With such *concentration*. Such *attention*. It caught me. I spoke with her. Spoke with her again. Asked her to the picture show. She came with me. We did this often."

He stared out the window, listening to the wind and the vibration in the windows, listening to the wailing emptiness in the garage behind him. "Finally, her parents said, 'this fireman is not to be our son-in-law.' And they chose a tailor." He shrugged. "A good man, wealthy, with his own shop and clothing store. I knew him. Krakow was not so big to hold only strangers. And she came to me to say good-bye."

There was no garage anymore, no wind, only the light snowy day in front of the café, its sign creaking in the breeze, the snow covering them both.

"I said, 'Don't marry him. Marry me.' And she looked at me. And she *saw* what I had to give her. What the tailor had to give her. That I would go away, that the war would come between us, that she would struggle, bear a silent unhappy child alone, be grandmother to a—" He stopped, breathed deeply a moment, stared into the bottle meditatively. "Then, I only knew she saw that no piece of her life with me would be easy. We would have a hard, difficult time. And she was right." He shrugged. "I looked down into the snow and made ready to say good-bye. It did not occur to me she could see *that* and still wish to have me. 'All right,' she said to me. Just that. 'All right.' "

Harry did not move for a while, staring out the window at the blowing papers, candy wrappers, leaves. He shook himself much as Jasper had done, shrugged and drank from the bottle. "And then, of course, I had to go and fight the fascists in Spain. We'd been married a little while by then, and she'd become pregnant. I said to myself, 'if they will fight in Spain, they will fight anywhere. Even here.' And I went away to stop them. And of course, I was captured. They took Poland before I escaped.

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I did not see my daughter until she was five. She did not know who I was." He turned to Jasper. "That is who *I* am, alien person."

Jasper stood and nodded—a motion he had learned from Harry. "I am warm, now, Mister Linden. I will go back out to the booth."

"Does any of that mean anything to you? Anything?" Harry stood at the door and stared at the alien as he entered the booth.

Jasper stopped in the booth and turned to Harry. "It means you to me, Mister Linden."

"And what the hell does *that* mean?" Jasper closed the booth door. "What does that mean?" Harry stood in the doorway until he grew cold, but Jasper did not leave the booth or answer.

The Copley was the premier restaurant in Copley Place, a modern pastel fortress dominating south downtown with a bland, pink malevolence. Rosewood and brass smoothed the Copley's edges, marble eased the eyes, and thick carpets hushed the footsteps. It gave Harry a plush, trapped feeling, a soft claustrophobia that brought him close to hysteria. The finish on the silverware was brushed pewter and the tablecloth was a dull rainy blue.

Randar Proong spoke softly as he suggested items from the menu. His suit matched the tablecloth and carpet. He smiled genially, bright teeth in a dark face. His nails were manicured.

"Try the sole. It is really quite good."

Harry felt as if he were drowning.

Proong led him unresisting through appetizers, before-dinner drinks, salad, sole, dessert, and coffee.

"What do you want?" Harry felt stuffed, dazed, no more alive than some lizard lying in the sun.

"The Rieken System is, of course, interested in your property." Proong chuckled slightly, looked across the restaurant. "We would like to buy it for a fair market value. More than you could make from it."

"Why?"

"There's no secret about it." Proong placed both palms together. "The market is low right now. The indigent aliens have been causing a move away from the city and property values have dropped. We feel this trend will reverse. Then, any property we purchase now we will make more profit on later. Nothing exciting."

"Yah." He nodded, intoxicated on food, wine, and surroundings.

"I thought we might have a chance to chat for a bit before we begin actual negotiations." He leaned back and watched Harry, relaxed, confident.

Harry remembered that look. The Nazis in Poland had had it. So had the Fascists in Spain. The doctor who delivered Margaret had it, as did

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the second doctor who diagnosed Down's Syndrome for her, condemning her with a label.

Just what would you be selling, Harry? he asked himself. Pain? A little heartache? So what if this empty man so easily buys you? Is that so terrible?

"I have employees—"

"Only one," corrected Proong. "And an alien at that. We considered that an interesting move on your part. A cheap investment for the time he puts in. Especially since you don't intend to pay him."

"I will pay him." Harry straightened up.

"Of course. Later. When the time comes. I understand." Proong shrugged. "Still, there is no *legal* obligation for you to do so, is there? He is a legal alien. The law is quite strict on that point. But a legal alien *what*? Animal? Pet? No rigorous definition has yet been approved. And until it is, he has no contract and you have no legal obligation."

"What would *you* do with him?" Harry stared at the tablecloth. What more did these people know?

"A policy has not yet been worked out." Proong studied his nails.

"Ah." Harry finished his wine.

"Can we begin negotiations next week?" From his coat pocket, Proong pulled a pocket calendar and studied it. "About the middle of the week would be good for me."

"I must think about it," he said slowly.

"Of course." Proong nodded. The waiter passed and Proong fielded the check deftly. "Please inform me as soon as you can. Our funds move quickly, and we should work out something soon. Here is my card. Shall I call you tomorrow?"

Harry stood and nodded as Proong left. He had no idea what he should do.

Sasha found him in the living room, sitting quietly in the blue predawn light, staring out the window. On the nightstand beside him there was a tall unopened bottle of whiskey.

"Harry?" she asked softly.

He turned to her. "Sasha?" Then, saw her. "Sasha."

She sat next to him. "What is wrong?"

He was silent a long moment, then shrugged. "I very nearly sold the garage. For a great deal of money." He shrugged again.

"To who? You would do this without asking me?" She leaned back and he saw she was hurt.

"No. I would not. But I almost did." The increasing light drew her features into perspective for him. Under the sagging flesh and partially

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blind eyes, he still saw her as she had been on that snowy day in Krakow. "How is it you stayed with me?" he wondered aloud.

"Some question." She shifted uncomfortably.

"Yah." He nodded. "I almost sold the garage to the Rieken System. I didn't for no good reason." He held his hands together in his lap. "I didn't because I was afraid if I didn't have something holding me down, I would fly away crazy. If I kept it, it should have been because Jasper trusted me, or because I would have hurt Margaret by hurting Jasper. Or some other good reason. We could have had money. I could have gotten better doctors for Margaret. I could have taken you somewhere. We could have had it easier." He shook his head and pressed his hands together until they were white. "If I didn't, it should be for reasons worth something. But I didn't because I was *afraid* to sell." She held him. "I wanted to do right. Sell or not sell for the right reasons."

After a time, he looked up at her. "How is it you stayed with me?"

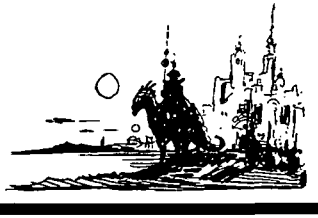
She shrugged. "There was no one else I wanted."

He stood on the roof looking down on the street, across to the mirror windows of the Hancock. He had no whiskey with him and no cigarettes, but the wind was still cold and biting. At least there was no rain. He had no real thoughts. At some point, the wind died down. He did not notice it.

He started at a touch on his face, a touch of feathers. He looked up and saw snow coming down in fine, faint flakes. From down below he heard, "Snow! Snow!" He went to the other side of the roof and looked down. Margaret was clapping her hands clumsily and jumping up and down. Jasper danced beside her, his body extended into a net of dragonfly's wings, moving them like bellows and singing in a deep bass croon.

They did not see him, and he watched as they tasted the snow. ●

—For Janet



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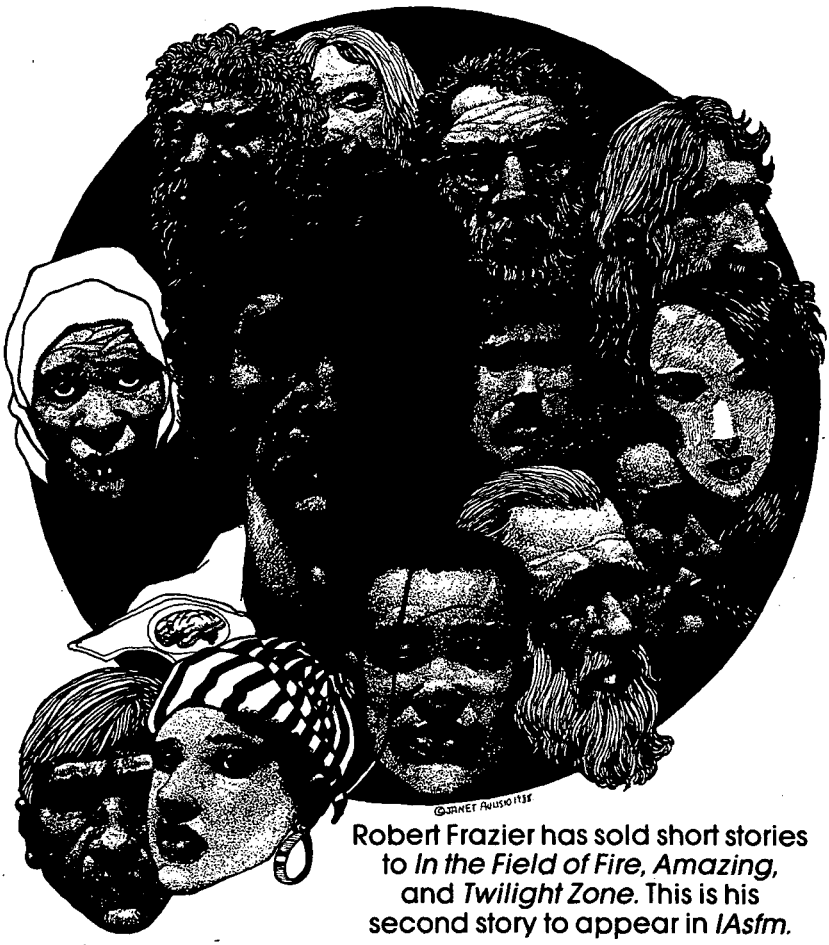
RETROVISION

by Robert Frazier



art: Janet Aulisio

Robert Frazier has sold short stories to *In the Field of Fire, Amazing,* and *Twilight Zone.* This is his second story to appear in *IAsfm.*

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Anxious to reach the hospital at the hub of Rio Base, Joaquim Boaz Cristobel hurried along the corridor of the innermost ring. He stretched his stride to its limit, pushing past the slow-moving crowds that toured the Brazilian colony as part of a cultural exchange program. Unable to navigate around a group of Matis in their Amazonian tribal dress, he pushed through them until he encountered a man who blocked his way completely. The face was familiar, he thought—then realized abruptly that it was his own.

Joaquim was not surprised by the mirrored wall, for the colonists frequently used such partitions to break up the monotony of their Martian life; yet he was surprised—and shocked—by his own appearance. He looked more aboriginal than the Matis: his black hair in dirty twists, salt and pepper stubble on his chin, eyes shot through with a fine capillary pink. He looked like shit. He *felt* like shit. Between extra shifts at the lab and night hours spent with Celina at the hospital, he'd barely slept. Christ, not at all. He brushed flat his rumpled blue lab coat, ran his fingers through his hair. He had to look good for his mother; she'd always demanded that.

In the next section of the ring, a corridor branched in toward the hub complex, and Joaquim hitched a ride on an electric dolly that was delivering chemical tanks to the hydroponic gardens there. The hub corridor and the ground level of the hub itself were abuzz with evening activity; the bigwigs down at the Sao Paulo shuttleport must have reserved a big transport for the tour this time, judging by the number of visitors. The dolly operator said the cryotanks must have cost a fortune. She wished she had some.

A clear path to the elevators opened to his left, so Joaquim thanked the woman with a nod and slipped off the dolly near a videoboard. A few tourists gawked at an update on the sandstorm that had hit late that afternoon, the reds and oranges swirling on the replays. Opposite the elevators, Joaquim leaned for a moment against the pitted glass windowall where the stars shone through. Then he took the express tube to the top of the hub.

At the tube exit into the hospital complex, a woman stopped him and tugged him over to where the body of a child lay slumped against a partition. "The boy died before I could get him to the doctors, Senhor," she said urgently. "But *you* can save him." She'd recognized Joaquim as a mnemoniphage, spotting the brown insignia on his lapel. "Please, save him, Senhor," she pleaded. "He was so precious."

Joaquim shuddered. "I am under contract to the colonial authorities," he said stiffly, through clenched teeth. "I can only preserve those important to the colony's survival."

"He's all I have, Senhor! My husband was killed in a mining accident."

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Joaquim shook his head blindly and walked away, pushing past the woman, who began to wail. He empathized with her, for he'd lost his own father to the harsh surface of Mars, but the fear in his gut paralyzed him. He resented his duties as a mnemoniphage, hated the horde of strangers bottled and fizzling in his skull.

He also faced a far more pressing duty.

Celina Cristobel was dying. Family tradition demanded that he preserve her. But Joaquim knew that he could not.

Joaquim turned from the view of the flood-lit towers outside and stared at his mother in the hospital bed, reading the signposts of her frailties: the thin white hair, the purse-stringed wrinkles about her slack lips, her shallow breathing, the big blue vein that throbbed on her neck like a newborn butterfly pumping up its wings.

Typical, he thought. Medical techniques improved, but a goddamn hospital bed always remained the same. This one was fundamentally the same as the dozens of others in his total collective memory, in the experiences of the mnemoniphaged individuals that trailed back in his mind to the late twentieth century. This bed had built-in videoboards to display spectroscoped biochemical levels and other medical data, but it also still featured ugly chrome railings, an uncomfortable plastic mattress that let the patient slide, and snow-white linen tucked tight enough to pass military inspection.

The hospital itself presented an appearance of great order and efficiency, but at heart it was no different from past facilities in Joaquim's memory. In spite of the high-tech gloss, the halls still smelled of antiseptics and toilet bowl chemicals, and postcard holograms of the Martian sunrise hung askew in the same spot in each identical room. A radio left on for an insomniac fizzled with static, giving off faint riffs of great composers like Philip Glass and Villa-Lobos, ground to a muzaky pablum. Technicians pushed equipment about on rollers that were just squeaky enough to wake only those patients in dire need of rest. Joaquim looked to Celina's arm where it rested on the cowling, noted a black and blue bruise. Shit, the nurses might be as highly-trained as advertised, but they could still botch a probe with an IV needle. All that seemed missing was a leaky faucet, though he imagined that it also must exist here somewhere, perhaps dripping in the dark recess where the sink retracted beneath the bed structure.

"Jake," his mother said. "Are you there, Jake?"

Celina spoke as if cotton filled her throat, preventing each word from forming, leaving the component sounds of his name to rattle against themselves. She drifted back to sleep, her mouth falling open beneath

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a hooked nose and pale cheeks. Joaquim sighed, then repressed a shudder. He'd look just like her someday.

"I'm here, Mamacita," he whispered as he sat beside her.

Joaquim gazed out the tinted windows again at Mars, past the compressor towers that extracted water from the carbon dioxide atmosphere above Mangala Vallis, past the confines of the crater base. Two solar-powered dirigibles outlined in red and blue lights were returning from a trade mission to the canal colonies near Olympus Mons. The slug-like ships resembled pupilless eyes set in stars and rimmed with foxfire. Night had become a funerary mask.

They're probably low on energy, he mused. But wasn't everyone? He'd been up with Celina since early evening, and he'd worked through the previous day cycle at the labs, testing a new ice sample. He was bone-ass weary. Plain and simple. And Celina? Her vital signs showed nothing acute, yet something seemed to have given way inside her, a core had collapsed, and weariness radiated through her greyed skin. Despite her adventurous self-image as a Martian *posseiro*, a handy pioneer scratching out homesteads in a vastly different kind of Amazonia, she had finally run out of juice. Suddenly, in a vivid stab of sound and light within his head, he was gripped by a memory from one of the first colonists, a memory of that colonist's frozen death down in the Big Feather channel of Mangala Vallis. The woman's battery pack had run down, the suit had stiffened, and time itself had seemed to alter, slowing down until it became fixed in stone, like the great channels carved by ancient flash-floods along the red plain. He nodded his head. The import of this memory of the woman's death was not lost on him. Celina was near the end.

Joaquim leaned over to check the green needle on the battery yoke for her LVAD heart assistant. It showed a full charge, no doubt it was functioning perfectly within her left ventricle. He leaned back in his metal chair, an uncomfortable thing that he'd grown so accustomed to during his long hours here that he'd forgotten about it and imagined himself sitting on air. He noticed the time on the LED display above the door. His night crew at GeoLab would be getting off shift in a few minutes. He glanced at his briefcase near the door. It contained a ton of work he'd ignored while sitting with Celina. At Geolab, Joaquim studied plugs that had been drilled from the Martian North Pole before it had been melted with an orbiting mirror . . . a strategy that terraformers hoped would chain-react into a greenhouse effect. His specialty was extinction theory, so he tested the plugs for striations of cosmic dust, signs of the cometary swarms that pelted the solar system every twenty-six million years—a possible factor in the mass extinctions of Earth species. His father, Paulo, had been a groundbreaker in this field, and Joaquim preserved his storehouse of insight and knowledge.

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As he shifted in his seat, his joints popped.

He wondered why he felt so old.

He was barely twenty-one, yet he encompassed the feelings of a centenarian . . . so he knew the answer even as he thought the question. He'd inherited the mnemoniphage gene that allowed him to assimilate, to gestaltically experience the dead. The lives of many Christobels survived within him, and they in turn—as mnemoniphages—held many others. These ancestors spoke to him, whispering secrets that might otherwise have died with them. They sifted through his brain like windblown sand filling the cracks in the Mangala basin. His father Paulo especially, since Joaquim continued with Paulo's studies. Who wouldn't feel old?

And what secrets, he wondered, would be lost when Celina was gone, what insight about their origins and extinctions, or their home on the red planet?

She seemed too fragile a package to hold much . . . yet even without her own root system of ancestors, she was a universe waiting to be explored. Joaquim remembered what she had said once to Paulo, before he had died in a storm accident and had been assimilated in a truly painful mnemoniphaging for Joaquim. It was a confused memory, combining his own viewpoint with the viewpoint of his father, yet the truth of it still touched him as it had touched them both then for a bare moment.

"It's such an *easy* thing for you to die," she had said. "Because you will live on."

Joaquim rubbed his eyes. A numb line ran straight through his head, above his right eye and the bridge of his nose, and his exhaustion urged it to diffuse and spread throughout his upper torso. He felt that if he were suddenly turned inside out, they'd find his blood and organs and bones reduced to a thick goo. He should have been alert for his mother, reliving their good times, yet instead he allowed a bland garble of thoughts to branch through his head—musings on beds and hospitals, on his work, on people past. He knew her time was short, yet he found no strong emotion within him to counter the dull reality, no cause to rant at the universe. Too much bad blood had existed between them in recent years, much of it centered on his decision to continue in his father's footsteps. Besides his passion for science, Paulo Cristobel had been fanatically dedicated to his role as a public mnemoniphage; and, despite a personal aversion, Joaquim had succumbed to political pressure and agreed to provide the same service for Rio Base, acting as a human library. His mother would not accept this. She grew callous toward Joaquim, hardened by her bitterness over the last, lonely years with Paulo. Joaquim was wounded. He allowed the bitterness to work on him also.

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It became increasingly difficult to separate the tender moments with a younger Celina from the troubled, embittered moments of the present.

"Jake?" She opened her eyes and leaned her head toward his side of the bed. "Do you have it with you?"

"Yes, Mamacita. Safe in my pocket."

He peeled the velcros on his right shoulder sleeve and removed a small corduroy case whose green nap had been worn smooth with decades of use. Celina's eyes widened for a moment, and then she succumbed to a fit of coughing and lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling with a glazed look. He gripped her ankle, as if to hold her from drifting away.

"Good," she said with a cough. "I want you to remember me with all the others."

There was a taunting, vicious undertone in her voice that gave her words a chilling ring. Joaquim realized that this was her final weapon against him, a blade of irony to be twisted in his gut. He'd have to absorb her life into his, literally swallowing the totality of her bitterness. Then he would see *himself* through *her* eyes. He'd experience all the times she thought he'd wronged her, from *her* point of view, and suffer all the accompanying pangs of guilt that he'd experienced when he mnemoniphaged his father. Acids roiled in his stomach like thunderheads, spitting lightning. He imagined the shock to his system, the dizzying double-image shift in his awareness.

He almost told her then that he couldn't do it.

Celina groaned and closed her eyes. He looked away, focusing on the case in his hand. He undid the antique zipper and unfolded the two halves in his palm. How he hated and feared the devices within. Just as Celina did, but for different reasons.

"Tell me about them," she pleaded. "They were your father's most prized possessions. The bastard."

Joaquim looked up sharply. She had surprised him; something he had not thought her capable of anymore, for he considered these last hours to be inexorable—choreographed and rehearsed by the wealth of similar memories in his mental library of death scenes. She hadn't opened her eyes, yet she'd known what he had done. Did she hear the minute whisper of the brass teeth as he unzipped it? Had she undergone a heightening of perception as she approached oblivion? As Joaquim's father had. Paulo Cristobel had felt like that when he lay broken in the sandstorm, his essence draining away into the red sands. He'd sensed some underlying rhythm, some pulse-like drumming in the storm's heart throbbing around him. The ebb and flow of entropy had coursed through him.

Celina interrupted his speculations.

"Please, Jake. Like you've described them before."

"Sorry. It kind of gripped me there for a second. The sight of it, I mean."

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"Ah, yes," she said. "It always did your father. Just a glimpse of his tools sent him back into his other selves. To *his* father, and his father's father. A backward vision. It was like a drug to him."

Celina placed both hands on the cowling over her chest and began to stroke the twisted arthritic fingers of one hand with those of the other, as if folding down the curled edges of hard copy as it fed off a computer printer. Up until this final hospitalization, she'd retained a position, at least part-time, as an information processor for the colony's weather watch.

"The kit contains five things," Joaquim began. "Two ampules of neurotrans stimulator. There's a pocket for a third, but I took that a half hour ago at your request. There's a circular mirror, modeled after an outmoded surgeon's headpiece. To illuminate the work."

He sensed Celina's impatience, and he found a perverse pleasure in dragging the description out.

"There's a battered gold tube used to suck up the necessary cells . . ."

"Jake?"

"Yes, Mama. I know. Father treasured this."

"How silly of me. Of *course* you know. You really *know*. But do you remember *yourself* how he'd wear it in his lapel? When the women would say 'There goes Paulo,' he'd puff out his chest and swagger. He looked so handsome." Suddenly her voice faded. She grew still. "Now the drill."

"It's hand-cranked, with a diamond tip. The tiny steel works are well oiled. And the handle." Joaquim realized that this was the part of the description she had waited for, the part of the litany about the handle.

"On the handle," he continued, "is a smooth round ball of hard brazilwood, from great grandfather's home in the Amazon. It is well worn, oiled by the skin of many hands. The wood's stained pink from . . ." he hesitated. "The blood. Grandfather's is part of that, as is father's."

She sighed, and it sounded like a small animal escaping in a flurry of feathers, like the whir of the hummingbirds and macaws kept in the colony's vast aviary. Joaquim held up the drill for his own inspection.

"It's a cranial drill, for making the incisions."

Celina said nothing. She no longer seemed to breathe.

Joaquim held the mirror from the kit above her slack lips. No vapor exited. He sat unmoving within the exterior silence all around him. A bubble of grief floated within his throat, and through his head rose the unbidden memories of a hundred other deaths.

Later, after the night nurse had attested to Celina's brain death, he placed his mouth upon his mother's mouth and drew her last air. As he held it, knowing he must hold it until his lungs throbbed and burned, he realized how fitting it was that she had departed during the description of the mnemoniphage tools, the simple instruments that would assure

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her of an immortality of sorts. Yet he cursed himself for yet another wave of indecision about continuing the ritual. Was he too bitter towards Celina, and too fearful of her memories, to really go through with mnemoniphaging her? Perhaps this doubt was also choreographed, but he'd expected better of himself. He shrugged in resignation, exhaled in a gasp, and continued with the ritual.

"Celina Cristobel. By the code of the mnemoniphage I must request permission of your surviving heirs to perform this rite." He accepted her silent approval and added his own. "I give permission."

Joaquim gritted his teeth and started the drill-bit turning. He was stubborn, a condition Celina had called "a vein of silver shot through the soul," yet despite this, and the patina of cool he tried to maintain about everything he said or did, the guilt was beginning to eat at him. A few tears forked like the traceries of a bayou along his cheeks.

He drilled into Celina's skull and penetrated the brain. His throat constricted as blood welled onto his fingertips and the drill's wooden knob.

"Here is the exit of life." Each word escaped as slow as a gas bubble rising through lava. "The portal. The path. The gateway of pain."

Instead of putting the gold tube between his lips, though, and sucking out brain tissue as the ritual demanded, he pushed the tube into the incision in her skull, forcing tissue into the tubing. He replaced it in his kit, along with the drill.

"Now we are mingled," he said, though it was a lie.

At the Geolab transportation garage, on the outer ring, he filled out triplicate forms for a rover, punching in the answers on the comptroller's screen. He wedged himself carefully into a "skinnie," a pressure suit with a flexible armor which tightly adhered over his lab coat. As he was adjusting the neck seal the comptroller returned with a hard copy for his signature.

"Dr. Cristobel, the purpose of your mission is listed as . . ."

"Mnemoniphaging!" His voice blared out in anger, startling him as well as the young woman. He could not cope with bureaucracy at a time like this. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Yes, well, geosurveys are the only authorized uses for these vehicles. You should sign out a general excursion rover from the base government." Her black eyes narrowed in challenge. She knew that he knew that the touring visitors had those rovers booked to the limit.

He cooled. Now he sensed that there was a grudge involved here somewhere. "Miss, this is essential to my present work as well as my future state of . . ."

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"I understand," she said, waving the papers at him. "But regs are regs."

"I have authority." He began to heat up again. "I'm under contract by the colonial administration."

"Oh, I know that. You told my mother that earlier today when you refused to help her." The woman's voice hissed with repressed vehemence. "You must remember that? The young boy?"

Joaquim tensed. He now knew the extent of the game she played against him. "For that, I'm sorry."

"But regs are regs, right?" She smiled triumphantly.

He nodded, knowing that she'd boxed him in.

"Look," he said. "Why don't you call this requisition whatever you like. Then later you can have a try for my neck over it. But I *am* taking the vehicle."

He watched surprise wash over her face, then a doubtful look as she squinted at him, and he felt as if he'd missed something important. He knew then that he had to get moving. Until he could get away by himself, and resolve this crisis over Celina, his actions would become more and more erratic, more out of control. She was still watching him. When he snapped his helmet in place, she flipped up the visor to speak to him.

"Have it back by 0900."

He nodded, resealed the visor and wiggled in behind the wheel of the rover. He eased the cab bubble down and punched in the vacuum seal. As the woman raised the inner door to the exit lock and he drove in, he saw relief on her face. It mirrored the mix of emotions within him. He just wanted to get *away*. He had a vague plan for burying the small bit of Celina he carried with him. He'd drive out to her favorite climbing spot near Rio Base and release it to the changing chemistry of the sands.

Joaquim steered the rover out of the lock and up the crater rim that surrounded Rio Base. As he mounted the plain above Rio and the main channel at Mangala, he passed two cumbersome ore caterpillars moving down into it toward the feather channels that branched away on the opposite side. The plain, which ended at the scarp of Mangala, was strewn with boulders and mini-craters, and winds whipped dust about his already-pitted windshield at speeds of thirty to forty knots, a calm morning in comparison to the three-hundred-knot intensity of the afternoon before. The sun turned the horizon into a raw wound behind the silhouettes of volcanoes slumbering in the distance. Joaquim polarized the windshield, and it was as if the whole planet had been developed in a photochemical bath: the pock-marked plains, the blast craters, the deltas etched in bedrock, the shifting dune crescents. The world bled red on red.

At a steep cliff near the convergence of Big Feather and the main channel, Joaquim eased the six-wheeler along the cliff edge until he

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reached Skaros. This curious wind-carved promontory had been a favorite climbing spot for Celina, who had once been the best free-solo rockclimber on Mars. It offered a superb overlook that rivaled the Grand Canyon or Olduvai Gorge on Earth. Back away from the channel, he could make out the details of Rio Base, enhanced by its growth of morning shadows. The base looked like a series of puzzle rings, linked and buried in sand to shield them from solar and cosmic radiation. At the center, the hub poked up like a teed golf ball, with the hospital along its equatorial girth.

She died there, he thought.

Joaquim checked the atmosphere in the cab, unclipped his left glove. He separated the seam on the shoulder of his suit and fished inside his lab coat, then inside the tool kit for the tube containing her brain tissue. His hand shook as he held the tube. If he let Celina go unpreserved, then his children and his children's children would lose a link in their family tree. And a key perspective on Martian life. He closed his eyes and drew a soft blob of her brain tissue into his throat, working to produce more saliva, swallowing. He couldn't deny her, as he had the woman with the boy. He closed his eyes and steeled himself against her onslaught.

Later, with the outside temperature spurting to minus 10, he adjusted his suit environment, climbed out of the rover, and began to free-solo up the face of Skaros. The neurotrans drug, now that it was combined with Celina's cortical cells, torched his nervous system. Memories began to pop in his head like flash bulbs. He climbed faster, clawing his way up a vertical crack until he reached a lip of rust basalt about three hundred meters from the base of Skaros. He sat with his back pressed against the sheer rock. There, at last, he opened his mind wide to a flood of images that boosted the noise level in his head, adding themselves to the countless information bits already stored there. His scalp prickled. His ears seemed to radiate heat. The top of his skull went numb.

Voices spoke a slush of random phrases that buzzed in an imaginary line between his ears. Many Joaquim recognized as people he had preserved during his work at Rio Base, while others were kin, like his father, whose experiences were colored with images of ancestral homes, Brazil, its people. The ebb and flow took Joaquim along a branching and rebranching series of lives until the drug no longer controlled the flow.

Celina's voice burst open within him, releasing the time-delay pills of her memories. For awhile, they dominated everything with a fresh perspective. Then the two sets fused and the noise rose in crescendo. He imagined it as a vast orchestra of strange instruments that imitated the human vocal apparatus, which then mingled with counterpointal songs. He twitched inside his suit, a seizure of almost epileptic intensity, yet his body responded with the trained instincts of a climber and he held

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on. A slow orgasm of sound melted through his head, topped by a familiar call. *"It's such an easy thing to die."*

Joaquim no longer heard a bitter quality in Celina's voice. The assimilation had ended. He was no longer distanced from her by his own fears and guilts and problems. He accepted her.

When he stretched, finally dampening the voices into a background murmur, the sun freed itself of the mountain tops and the thin atmospheric haze to illuminate Mars in full. It painted Mangala Vallis in a seemingly-endless pastel of ochres, purples, and reds. Joaquim's mind seemed as clear as his view. The moment matched none among all those he stored, yet it held an implication with meaning for them all—a look at the role of his kind over the coming centuries.

One day, he realized, humanity would be born with its heritage in place, with its past melded into the present in a unity as subtle as these dawn colors. *Everyone* would be a mnemoniphage. Everyone would see back to the very first of their kind, like his father, like himself. They would all possess this strange kind of immortality. Until the cycles of extinction rolled against *them* as well, and they *all* passed the way of the crinoids and the coccoliths and the dinosaurs. Until then, he reasoned, there was plenty of work to do.

Joaquim picked up a thumb-sized chunk of basalt and flipped it out from the rock cliff, watching it fall until it shrank to nothing against the mottled background of the channel below. He felt strength return, overcoming his weariness. Celina was a part of this world now, part of its legacy, and, despite the pain her memories would bring, part of him, too. Joaquim had never considered himself truly alone, and he felt even less so now. He picked up another wedge of rock and tossed it.

The voices within him spoke. *There's one for you, Celina.*

Later, someone stopped a rover near Skaros and radioed to Joaquim about a dustgale due that morning. For a moment he was mesmerized by the woman's tiny face behind the red-tinted bubble of the cab. Would he preserve *her* someday? Who else would be bound with him and Celina in the web of the future?

The woman asked if he was well, and Joaquim assured her that he was fine. He said he'd keep in touch with the base weather watch and be in before the storm. She started up and rolled over the rough terrain toward where Rio spread in the distance, a hive mound surrounded by caterpillars and insectoid dirigibles.

Joaquim turned and set himself for the slow hand and foot descent down the rock wall to his rover. His muscles flexed within his suit. Further within, the rhythm of his people seemed to pulse in his veins. A musical tempest moving with an unknown yet irrevocable purpose.

Joaquim moved with it. ●

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FLATLINE

by Walter Jon Williams

art: Marc Davis

Walter Jon Williams's novella, "Witness," which was published as a segment of *Wildcards I* (Bantam Books' mosaic novel), is currently a finalist for the 1987 Nebula award. Mr. Williams has just completed work on *Angel Station*, a big new novel that will be coming out from Tor Books in the Spring of 1989.

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You can look down from your apartment and see streets full of new automobiles, all smooth geometries that cut the air with a minimum of fuss and are built of carbonweave fiber strong as diamond and less than a millimeter thick. Pollution-free fuel cells provide more power than any internal-combustion engine ever did. Driving one of those cars is as safe as breathing.

You drive a 1952 Buick Roadmaster. Its exterior is made of steel, its aerodynamics are strikingly similar to those of a brick, and it leaves a trail of smoke behind. If you hit something while going fast enough, you die.

Call it a form of protest.

Your apartment building opens like a flower over the city, a slender alloy shaft topped by a profuse glass-walled blossom. If you look down from your bedroom window you can see the spidery Gaussian architecture of Fantasyland, a hyperevolved Crystal Palace where the latest technological artifacts are available for purchase to an increasingly jaded and unsettled public. Fantasyland's architecture swoops and soars; it strains toward singularities, geometric infinities. You think it's fairly pretentious for what used to be called a shopping mall. Particularly since the Exfoliators sometimes dump bodies in the parking lot.

Ninety degrees in the other direction, you can look out your dining room window to see the matte-black octohedron of Neurodyne Intelgene A.G. The building, 450 meters tall, is packed from end to end with molecular switches bathed in coolant. The total number of microscopic switches in that volume is so huge that even when expressed in scientific notation the figure looks absurd. You work in the nearby factory that produces the coolant, and you've seen the figures. The switches multiply and repair each other and sometimes, every few weeks or so, mutate to more efficient forms. They absorb raw energy in the form of sunlight, store it, transform it into things they can eat. Taken together, the switches form an intelligence far faster, far more complex, than any human brain.

The Neurodyne octohedron is balanced on its point. It looks as if the slightest breeze would push it over.

The octohedron never falls. To some, that's a problem.

The Club Danton is a place that caters to forms of protest. Political, social, religious, philosophical—if it's aberrant, it's there. The strawberry cheesecake is also good.

The club is in an old brick building under a rusting iron railroad bridge. The bridge doesn't connect anything anymore, and its rails dangle off the ends of the bridge in an oxidized tangle of metal. The bridge would

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have been torn down long ago except that the club bought it and allowed it to stand. They thought it gave the place atmosphere.

Over the structure looms the planar perfection of the Neurodyne octohedron. This is viewed by some as a comment on things, as another significant metaphor.

After finishing your four-hour shift at the underground Neurodyne facility—you supervise automated machines that ship coolant to AIs—you head for the Club Danton. It's a job you've held for four years, ever since the Providence Privateers let you go after two inglorious seasons. The team managers didn't approve of the fact you didn't like pain. You hadn't been told you were supposed to.

As you drive past the octohedron, you observe that a Regressers cult, dressed in homespun, hair and beards long, is using the building for shelter, setting cookfires in its shadow. Neurodyne doesn't care. The cult can push and shove all it wants, and the octohedron still won't fall off its point.

You drive to the club and park under the bridge. Gustav (latest version) sits on his customary window seat, and you wave hello. He signals you to join him.

Gustav is a dwarf. No one has to be a dwarf these days, not unless he wants to be, so Gustav is a dwarf by way of making a statement. He has stunted his body as metaphor for what he believes society has done to his soul. Gustav is a dedicated revolutionary, and wants to wean people away from their technology.

Because he does things that are illegal, Gustav makes it hard for people to find him. He has no fixed abode, and changes his appearance regularly. Little molecular machines beneath his skin alter the structure of his face every few days.

Molecular machines are the principal technology that Gustav wants to wean people away from. Dedicated revolutionaries, you suspect, learn to live with these sorts of contradictions.

You get out of the Buick and walk into the club. There are some truly repulsive people in here, many of them having altered their appearance to include scales, fangs, multiple eyes, and devil horns. There are giants, dwarfs, hermaphrodites, lunatics, killers. It's all stance, a form of protest. All a game, even though sometimes the players die. Their lives don't mean much to them.

Everyone in the Club Danton is a flatliner. They're all just about as useful as the railroad bridge above their heads, with its short rusting tracks leading from one precipice to another.

The curve that represents the capabilities of artificial intelligence,

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plotted against time, rises over the last two decades to a near-vertical line, soaring right off the chart in the direction of infinity, a singularity similar in form to those implied by the architecture of Fantasyland. If human potential were plotted on the same graph, the resultant stuttering line would barely nudge upward. It's flat, as flat as the destinies of most people on our sad and unstable planet.

Molecular machines radically increased production and efficiency. They think faster, conceptualize better, learn from their mistakes, move data in the wink of an eye. They are perfectly efficient: no wasted resources, no pollution, no harmful side effects. They were intended to liberate us from drudgery, boredom, and even our mortality, to unleash hidden reserves of human potential.

For all but a few, the reserves of human potential remain hidden. A fraction of the population—maybe two percent—possesses the imagination and ability to make use of the new technology, to use it to express themselves, their ideals, to bring themselves to full flower.

The rest of us drowned in a sea of microscopic intelligence. We gorged on new consumer toys till we were sick of them. Our leisure time was dutifully employed in arts and crafts, "realizing ourselves" as the phrase went, until we learned despair by comparing our product with the elegant, efficient designs of nanotechnique. Molecular machines could rebuild our bodies, turn us into superbeings. But there is still an upper physiological limit on brain size, on brain power. We can't become the human equivalent of the Neurodyne building. Our technology had outevolved us. We had become useless, lacking in meaning.

Religion or ideology appealed to many, but both seemed irrelevant to the basic dilemma. Cults and gangs and terrorists proliferated: none made much of an impression. Even the ultimate resort of the frustrated—full-scale war—failed. World War XVII lasted maybe six minutes. No one died. One side's machines so outevolved the others that the losers had no choice but surrender. Whichever side gives the machines greater freedom inevitably triumphs.

The gifted two percent will fulfill the human dream, fly to the stars, live as gods, reach an ultimate understanding of the universe. The rest of us, the flatliners, grow more and more irrelevant. We don't even have the consolation of meaning anything anymore, not even to ourselves.

"Hey," says Gustav. "It's the jock. Mr. Neutrality."

You sit down and order plum brandy and cheesecake. You can see the bulge of a pistol under Gustav's armpit. Whatever his current appearance, there's been a desperate look in his eyes lately.

Gustav changes his face but he never changes his height, which of course makes him easier to find than he'd like to be. In the conflict

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between practicality and principle, principle won out. You admire Gustav for that, although of course it tends to make you wary. People with principles have a way of getting other people killed.

"Not been sleeping?" you ask.

"I need your help."

You contemplate the plum brandy against the light. "That's what Ugarti said to Rick, and look where it got him."

"Just a place to stay. Till I get a new face."

You shrug. "Probably. But only if I know who's after you."

"I had a little ideological dispute last night with the Romantic Marxists. They want to build Socialist Man with genetic technology. I keep telling them that genetic technology is the *problem*." He sighed. "The debate got a little heated. I had to shoot one of them to make my point."

"The last time I got involved in one of your disputes," you say, "the Exfoliators tried to fire a rocket-propelled grenade through my apartment window. Lucky the window was evolved polarized titanium and the thing bounced off."

The Exfoliators are very serious people. They believe that nothing has meaning if it's given to you by technology. They believe that objects acquire meaning only if the are taken, preferably by violence, from someone who doesn't want to give them up. The Exfoliators, due to their seriousness, have gone a long way toward controlling the local black market in human-made goods.

"Don't worry," Gustav says. "The Romantic Marxists only use old-line technology. They'll probably come after me with flintlock pistols. If they were Evolved Marxists, there might be problems."

"Okay," you say, sampling the cheesecake, "but if anyone blows up my Buick, it's your ass."

"Giving me shelter is the least you can do for the revolution," Gustav says. "Since you won't do anything else."

"Show me something that can matter," you say, "and I'll do it. But you're not risking my neck for something that can't possibly work. Which is everything you've suggested so far."

On stage, a woman is being auctioned off to the freaks below. She is allowing her body and pride to be abused as a form of protest against their (and her) general uselessness. The bidding is spirited. Even among the jaded, sex still sells.

Gustav watches, interested. You turn away and concentrate on the cheesecake. The proceedings do not appeal to you.

So you're old-fashioned.

The auction concludes, and Gustav groans. "Lewis," he says.

"Lewis bought her?" you ask, surprised.

"Lewis is coming *here*."

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"Too late to leave, I suppose."

He covers his eyes. "Too late."

Lewis plops down in one of the vacant chairs. He wears his usual eager grin. You try hard to conceal your dismay.

Lewis is in his middle twenties but looks ten years younger. He's plump and pale and has chubby chipmunk cheeks. He's losing his hair. He's brilliant, so far as you can tell, but somewhere he went wrong and joined the rest of us. He has enough smarts and imagination to become one of the people who could really direct the new technology, live and prosper by it, but he developed a sympathy for the underdog, and now he's trying to overthrow the status quo. Without any possibility of success, of course. Each scheme has been more preposterous than the last, and he drones on about them in excruciating, and incomprehensible, detail. The last scheme was a plan to topple the Neurodyne octohedron into the Fantasyland parking lot by use of grappling hooks hanging from a hijacked space elevator.

He takes a small vial from his pocket and puts it on the table, then grabs one of the forks from the place settings and begins digging into your cheesecake. "Guess what I've got," he says.

You and Gustav look at each other. "Tell me," you say.

"Victory's ours. Prepare to take power." He nudges the vial across the table toward you.

"With that?" you ask.

He finishes the cheesecake, leans back in his chair, and grins. "I've done it," he says. He picks up the vial and shakes it. "Something new. We can return to human beings control of their own destiny. Isn't it great?"

Gustav gives you a tired smile. "Right," you say. "And for this I gave up my cheesecake."

He giggles. "You don't believe me. Listen. I've really done it this time." He displays the vial. "Tailored microviruses." He raised a clenched fist. "Death to the oppressors!"

"Let me guess," you say. "You want me to help you disperse them where I work."

"Of course," he says. "How else will the plan work?"

"Better start *thinking* of how else, Lewis."

Lewis is crestfallen. "You mean you won't help me?"

Gustav lights a cigar. "Of course he won't," he says. "Mr. Neutrality never helps *anybody*. Even when somebody sensible, like me, comes up with a scheme that might work."

"Oh. Right." Lewis is undeterred. "You don't think it'll work. Let me explain it to you." He blinks up at you. "You know anything about phage viruses?"

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"Oh for chrissake . . ." You signal for more cheesecake. You're going to have to raise your blood sugar before you can tolerate much more of this.

"Viruses, see, are shaped just like little hypodermic syringes. They have a tough protein coat that protects the nucleic acid in the middle, and when they infect a bacterium they inject the nucleic acid through the cell wall. *They totally lose their identity as individuals.* They're undetectable except as genetic material, and that genetic material can subvert the genetic programming of the host cell."

"Now you're going to tell me that you've got an invincible viral weapon," you say, "and that all I have to do is put some of it into the coolant at work, and that it will destroy all the artificial intelligences in the world."

Lewis blinks at you. "Right," he says. "I knew you'd do it." Your cheesecake arrives. Lewis takes it from the waitress and begins to eat.

Gustav can't take it anymore. He jams his cigar-filled face right into Lewis's. "Do you know how often he's been asked that?" he demands. "Do you know how often *I've* asked him to do that? I've had access to *dozens* of invincible viral weapons! And *not one of them* was worth a shit when it came time to use them." Lewis, a bemused look on his face, gazes into Gustav's face at two inches' range and continues to eat your cheesecake.

"Mine's better," he says. "Instead of the protein sheath, I used a double layer of evolved aluminum only two molecules thick. When the coolant is heated in use, the outer layer melts and frees the inner layer to find a target and attack it."

"You *fuckhead!*" Gustav roars. "You think the AIs haven't figured out where their greatest weakness is? You think they haven't taken steps to protect themselves against a weapon like yours?" He points at you. "Embarrassed as I am to admit it, Mr. Neutrality here was *right* to turn all those people down."

"You haven't been listening." Lewis finishes your cheesecake. "That's what I meant about my sheath being only two molecules thick. The whole virus is only five millemicrons across. The smallest *real* virus is twenty. The target won't be looking for something that small. They can't filter it. Look at the projections." He reaches into his briefcase and pulls out a thick sheet of printouts. "Something the size of the Neurodyne building—maybe three hours, and the whole thing turns to cream cheese."

You glance at the printouts. "Where'd you get this stuff done?"

Lewis gives you a triumphant grin. "I bought time on Neurodyne, of course. I had to break the program up into bits, so the AI wouldn't figure out what I was asking it."

"Time on Neurodyne," you say. "That's expensive."

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He shrugs. "I took on a job for the Exfoliators. They wanted a new kind of nerve gas to use on the Robin Cult. I strung 'em along for a couple months, took their money, did this instead." He giggles again. "Boy, are they gonna look *stupid*."

The cigar falls from Gustav's lips. "You took money from the Exfoliators and *didn't do the work?*"

Lewis gives a laugh. "Clever, huh?"

"You *asshole!*"

Which, you guess, is the last thing Lewis hears, because as Gustav turns away to find his cigar, an Exfoliator assassin, his face altered to look like an armor-plated dinosaur, steps up behind Lewis and takes him apart. Literally. The weapon he uses is a handle from which extrudes a number of carbon strands, each only molecules thick, each stiffened with a charge of static electricity. The invisible wires move through bone and sinew, nerve and organ, and slice Lewis into thin layers. He comes apart like a potato cut into home fries. The chair he's sitting in comes apart with him.

You and Gustav, far too late, hit the floor, about the time slices of Lewis begin to fall like leaves.

The next thing you see is the waitress staring down at the mess. "Oh, *gross!*" she says. The assassin is already gone.

The vial, still intact, bounces to the floor right next to your hand.

For several days you and Gustav stare at the vial that sits on the table in your apartment. You don't talk about it. You try very hard to pretend it doesn't exist. Finally you sigh and ask Gustav (newer version) to find you some equipment. You use the equipment to take the stuff from the vial and put fractional amounts of it into tailored gel caps. When you go to work next day, supervising the automated assembly line that is making coolant for AIs all over North America, you begin dropping Lewis's ultimate viral weapon into every hundredth container. The gel caps dissolve and release the virus.

A few days later, trouble starts. It isn't long before the AIs figure out the problem is and how to fight it. At Neurodyne, which is the only place where you can access the figures, the dataflow in and out of the octohedron is thrown almost twenty minutes off schedule.

Twenty minutes: that's longer than the last several world wars. The biggest disruption in years.

It takes the AIs about three days to trace the troubles back to you. Maybe the disruptions slowed them down, or maybe they just wanted to be sure. You had cleaned up your apartment, and there was nothing to find, so they couldn't fire you. You just got transferred to a less sensitive job.

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You don't mind. Now you've got more time to learn about virology. You and Gustav are going into the sabotage business. He's got the contacts, and you've got access to the Neurodyne terminals. Lewis had the right idea. Maybe you can improve on his basic design.

You don't want to talk about Lewis's death changing anything. It wasn't that you suddenly realized how Lewis had died for his viral weapon, that you wanted to give meaning to his tragic life—nothing like that. Lewis, whatever his IQ, was an idiot. He deserved what happened to him. He *asked* for it.

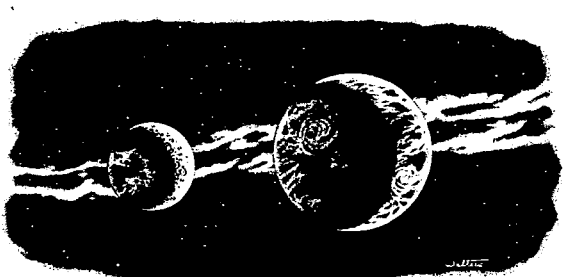
You've gone into the sabotage business for reasons entirely your own. You've done it to give meaning to *your* life.

You know that it's not going to change the world, not going to overthrow the structure of modern society. The Neurodyne octohedron isn't going to fall off its point, not for anything you're likely to do. But what you're doing is more constructive than religious cults or black markets or despair. If nothing else you're improving the AIs, helping them get smarter and tougher. In that sense, maybe you're an agent of evolution.

You're beginning to understand why the Privateers let you go. If you do something, you've got to do it all the way. With football, that includes pain. You have to love the game in spite of pain, in spite of what it does to you. With your new profession, the deal includes futility. You have to love the job in spite of the fact that it may not mean anything to anybody except you, that it may not change anything at all except the way you look at yourself.

You're learning to love the job. The challenge, the excitement, even the pointlessness.

Love, you find, is a wonderful thing. ●



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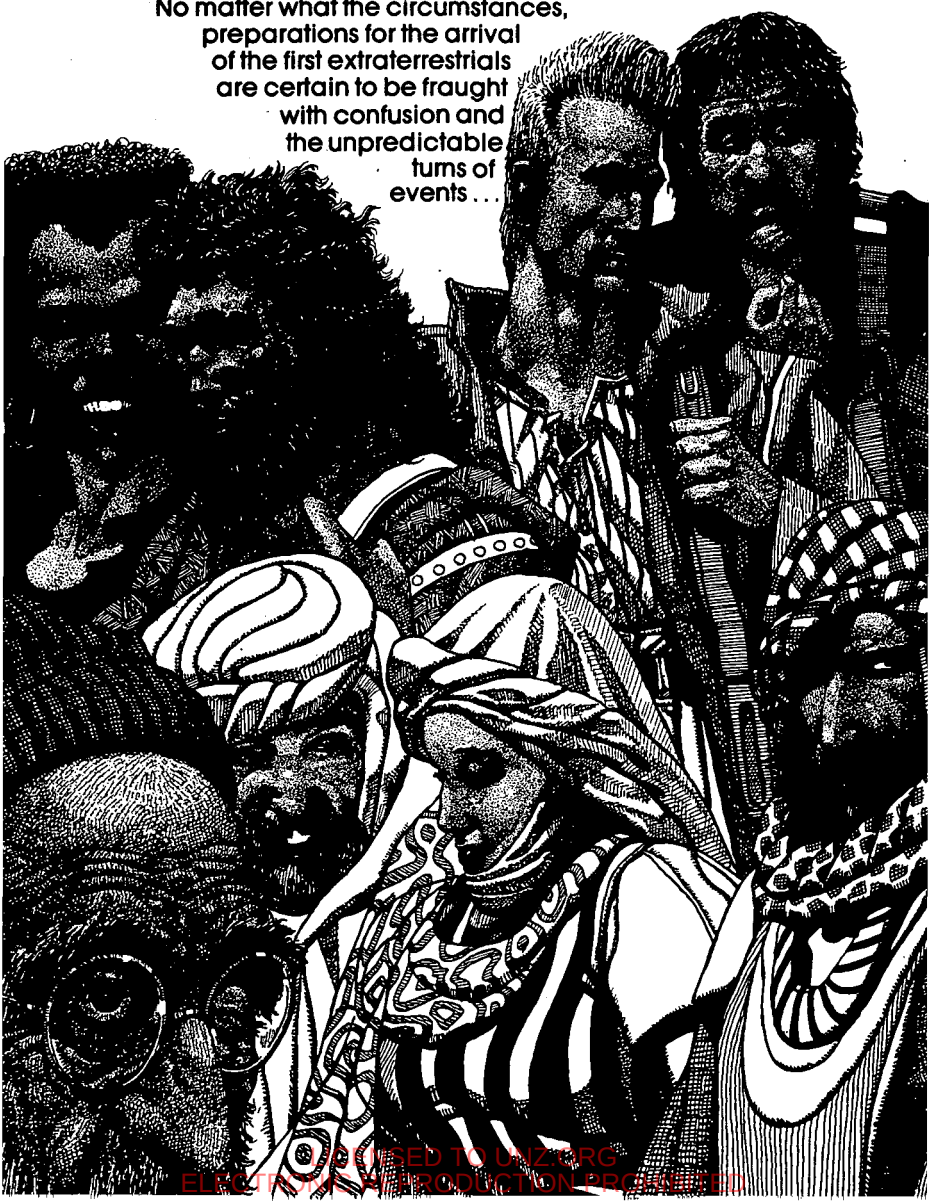
No matter what the circumstances, preparations for the arrival of the first extraterrestrials are certain to be fraught with confusion and the unpredictable turns of events . . .

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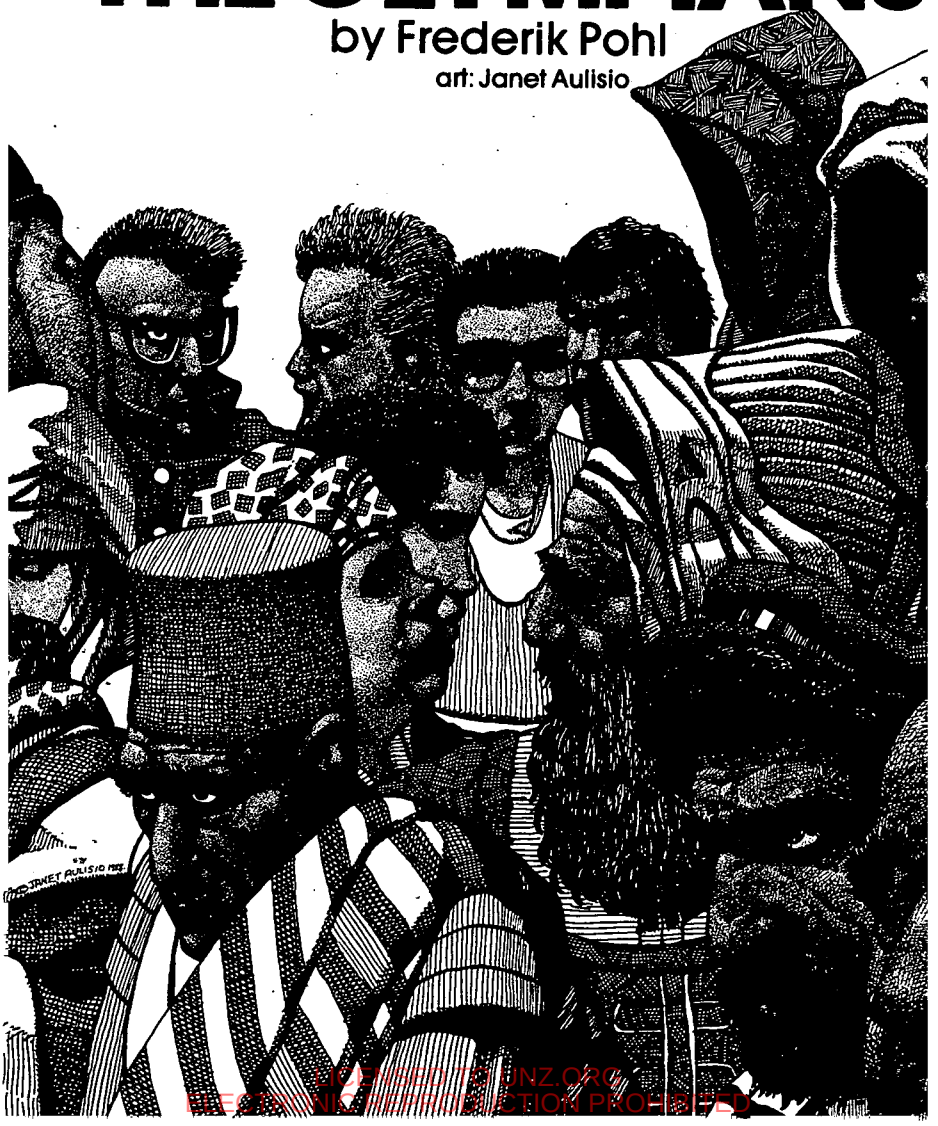
WAITING FOR THE OLYMPIANS

by Frederik Pohl

art: Janet Aulisio



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Chapter 1
"The Day of the Two Rejections"

If I had been writing it as a novel, I would have called the chapter about that last day in London something like "The Day of the Two Rejections." It was a nasty day in late December, just before the holidays. The weather was cold, wet, and miserable—well, I said it was London, didn't I?—but everybody was in a sort of expectant holiday mood; it had just been announced that the Olympians would be arriving no later than the following August, and everybody was excited about that. All the taxi drivers were busy, and so I was late for my lunch with Lidia. "How was Manahattan?" I asked, sliding into the booth beside her and giving her a quick kiss.

"Manahattan was very nice," she said, pouring me a drink. Lidia was a writer, too—well, they *call* themselves writers, the ones who follow famous people around and write down all their gossip and jokes and put them out as books for the amusement of the idle. That's not really *writing*, of course. There's nothing creative about it. But it pays well, and the research (Lidia always told me) was a lot of fun. She spent a lot of time traveling around the celebrity circuit, which was not very good for our romance. She watched me drink the first glass before she remembered to ask politely, "Did you finish the book?"

"Don't call it 'the book,' " I said. "Call it by its name, *An Ass's Olympiad*. I'm going to see Marcus about it this afternoon."

"That's not what I'd call a great title," she commented—Lidia was always willing to give me her opinion on anything, when she didn't like it. "Really, don't you think it's too late to be writing another sci-rom about the Olympians?" And then she smiled brightly and said, "I've got something to say to you, Julie. Have another drink first."

So I knew what was coming right away, and that was the first rejection.

I'd seen this scene building up. Even before she left on that last "research" trip to the West I had begun to suspect that some of that early ardor had cooled, so I wasn't really surprised when she told me, without any further foreplay, "I've met somebody else, Julie."

I said, "I see." I really did see, and so I poured myself a third drink while she told me about it.

"He's a former space pilot, Julius. He's been to Mars and the Moon and everywhere, and, oh, he's such a sweet man. And he's a champion wrestler, too, would you believe it? Of course, he's still married, as it happens. But he's going to talk to his wife about a divorce as soon as the kids are just a little older."

She looked at me challengingly, waiting for me to tell her she was an

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idiot. I had no intention of saying anything at all, as a matter of fact, but just in case I had she added, "Don't say what you're thinking."

"I wasn't thinking anything," I protested.

She sighed. "You're taking this very well," she told me. She sounded as though that were a great disappointment to her. "Listen, Julius, I didn't plan this. Truly, you'll always be dear to me in a special way. I hope we can always be friends—" I stopped listening around then.

There was plenty more in the same vein, but only the details were a surprise. When she told me our little affair was over I took it calmly enough. I always knew that Lidia had a weakness for the more athletic type. Worse than that, she never respected the kind of writing I do, anyway. She had the usual establishment contempt for science-adventure romances about the future and adventures on alien planets, and what sort of relationship could that be, in the long run?

So I left her with a kiss and a smile, neither of them very sincere, and headed for my editor's office. That was where I got the second rejection. The one that really hurt.

Mark's office was in the old part of London, down by the river. It's an old company, in an old building, and most of the staff are old, too. When the company needs clerks or copy editors it has a habit of picking up tutors whose students have grown up and don't need them any more and retraining them. Of course, that's just for the people in the lower echelons. The higher-ups, like Mark himself, are free, salaried executives, with the executive privilege of interminable, winey author-and-editor lunches that don't end until the middle of the afternoon.

I had to wait half an hour to see him; obviously he had been having one of those lunches that day. I didn't mind. I had every confidence that our interview was going to be short, pleasant and remunerative. I knew very well that *An Ass's Olympiad* was one of the best sci-roms I had ever done. Even the title was clever. The book was a satire, with classical overtones—from *The Golden Ass* of the ancient writer, Lucius Apuleius, two thousand years ago or so; I had played off the classic in a comic, adventurous little story about the coming of the real Olympians. I can always tell when a book is going really well and I knew the fans would eat this one up. . . .

When I finally got in to see Marcus he had a glassy, after-lunch look in his eye, and I could see my manuscript on his desk.

I also saw that clipped to it was a red-bordered certificate, and that was the first warning of bad news. The certificate was the censor's verdict, and the red border meant it was an obstat.

Mark didn't keep me in suspense. "We can't publish," he said, pressing his palm on the manuscript. "The censors have turned it down."

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"They can't!" I cried, making his old secretary lift his head from his desk in the corner of the room to stare at me.

"They did," Mark said. "I'll read you what the obstat says: '—of a nature which may give offense to the delegation from the Galactic Consortium, usually referred to as the Olympians—' and '—thus endangering the security and tranquility of the Empire—' and, well, basically it just says no. No revisions suggested. Just a complete veto; it's waste paper now, Julie. Forget it."

"But *everybody* is writing about the Olympians!" I yelped.

"Everybody *was*," he corrected. "Now they're getting close, and the censors don't want to take any more chances." He leaned back to rub his eyes, obviously wishing he could be taking a nice nap instead of breaking my heart. Then he added tiredly, "So what do you want to do, Julie? Write us a replacement? It would have to be fast, you understand; the front office doesn't like having contracts outstanding for more than thirty days after due date. And it would have to be good. You're not going to get away with pulling some old reject out of your trunk—I've seen all those already, anyway."

"How the hells do you expect me to write a whole new book in thirty days?" I demanded.

He shrugged, looking sleepier and less interested in my problem than ever. "If you can't, you can't. Then you'll just have to give back the advance," he told me.

I calmed down fast. "Well, no," I said, "there's no question of having to do that. I don't know about finishing it in thirty days, though—"

"I do," he said flatly. He watched me shrug. "Have you got an idea for the new one?"

"Mark," I said patiently, "I've *always* got ideas for new ones. That's what a professional writer is. He's a machine for thinking up ideas. I always have more ideas than I can ever write—"

"Do you?" he insisted.

I surrendered, because if I'd said yes the next thing would have been that he'd want me to tell him what it was. "Not exactly," I admitted.

"Then," he said, "you'd better go wherever you go to get ideas, because, give us the new book or give us back the advance, thirty days is all you've got."

There's an editor for you.

They're all the same. At first they're all honey and sweet talk, with those long alcoholic lunches and blue-sky conversation about million-copy printings while they wheedle you into signing the contract. Then they turn nasty. They want the actual book delivered. When they don't

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get it, or when the censors say they can't print it, then there isn't any more sweet talk and all the conversation is about how the aediles will escort you to debtors' prison.

So I took his advice. I knew where to go for ideas, and it wasn't in London. No sensible man stays in London in the winter anyway, because of the weather and because it's too full of foreigners. I still can't get used to seeing all those huge, rustic Northmen and dark Hindian and Arabian women in the heart of town. I admit I can be turned on by that red caste mark or by a pair of flashing dark eyes shining through all the robes and veils—I suppose what you imagine is always more exciting than what you can see, especially when what you see is the short, dumpy Britian women like Lidia.

So I made a reservation on the overnight train to Rome, to transfer there to a hydrofoil for Alexandria. I packed with a good heart, not neglecting to take along a floppy sun hat, a flask of insect repellent and—oh, of course—stylus and blank tablets enough to last me for the whole trip, just in case a book idea emerged for me to write. Egypt! Where the world conference on the Olympians was starting its winter session . . . where I would be among the scientists and astronauts who always sparked ideas for new science-adventure romances for me to write . . . where it would be warm. . . .

Where my publisher's aediles would have trouble finding me, in the event that no idea for a new novel came along.

Chapter 2
On the Way to the Idea Place

No idea did.

That was disappointing. I do some of my best writing on trains, aircraft, and ships, because there aren't any interruptions and you can't decide to go out for a walk because there isn't any place to walk to. It didn't work this time. All the while the train was slithering across the wet, bare English winter countryside toward the Channel, I sat with my tablet in front of me and the stylus poised to write, but by the time we dipped into the tunnel the tablet was still virgin.

I couldn't fool myself. I was stuck. I mean, *stuck.* Nothing happened in my head that could transform itself into an opening scene for a new sci-rom novel.

It wasn't the first time in my writing career that I'd been stuck with the writer's block. That's a sort of occupational disease for any writer. But this time was the worst. I'd really counted on *An Ass's Olympiad.* I had even calculated that the publication date could be made to coincide

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with that wonderful day when the Olympians themselves arrived in our solar system, with all sorts of wonderful publicity for my book flowing out of that great event, so the sales should be *immense* . . . and, worse than that, I'd already spent the on-signing advance. All I had left was credit, and not much of that.

Not for the first time, I wondered what it would have been like if I had followed some other career. If I'd stayed in the Civil Service, for instance, as my father had wanted.

Really, I hadn't had much choice. I was born during the Space Tricentennial Year, and my mother told me the first word I said was "Mars." She said there was a little misunderstanding there, because at first she thought I was talking about the god, not the planet, and she and my father had long talks about whether to train me for the priesthood, but by the time I could read she knew I was a space nut. Like a lot of my generation (the ones that read my books), I grew up on spaceflight. I was a teenager when the first pictures came back from the space probe to the Alpha Centauri planet Julia, with its crystal glasses and silver-leafed trees. As a boy I corresponded with another youth who lived in the cavern colonies on the Moon, and I read with delight the shoot-'em-ups about outlaws and aediles chasing each other around the satellites of Jupiter. I wasn't the only kid who grew up space-happy, but I never got over it.

Naturally I became a science-adventure romance writer; what else did I know anything about? As soon as I began to get actual money for my fantasies I quit my job as secretary to one of the imperial legates on the Western continents and went full-time pro.

I prospered at it, too—prospered reasonably, at least—well, to be more exact, I earned a livable, if irregular, income out of the two sci-roms a year I could manage to write, and enough of a surplus to support the habit of dating pretty women like Lidia out of the occasional bonus when one of the books was made into a broadcast drama or a play.

Then along came the message from the Olympians, and the whole face of science-adventure romances was changed forever.

It was the most exciting news in the history of the world, of course. There really *were* other intelligent races out there among the stars of the Galaxy! It had never occurred to me that it would affect me personally, except with joy.

Joy it was, at first. I managed to talk my way into the Alpine radio observatory that had recorded that first message, and I heard it recorded with my own ears:

Dit *squah* dit.
Dit *squee* dit *squah* dit dit.
Dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squah* dit dit dit.

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Dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squah* wooooo.
Dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squah* dit dit dit dit dit.

It all looks so simple now, but it took a while before anyone figured out just what this first message from the Olympians was. (Of course, we didn't call them "Olympians" then. We wouldn't call them that now if the priests had anything to say about it, because they think it's almost sacrilegious, but what else are you going to call godlike beings from the heavens? The name caught on right away, and the priests just had to learn to live with it.) It was, in fact, my good friend Flavius Samuelus ben Samuelus who first deciphered it and produced the right answer to transmit back to the senders—the one that, four years later, let the Olympians know we had heard them.

Meanwhile, we all knew this wonderful new truth: We weren't alone in the universe! Excitement exploded. The market for sci-roms boomed. My very next book was *The Radio Gods*, and it sold its head off.

I thought it would go on forever.

It might have, too . . . if it hadn't been for the timorous censors.

I slept through the tunnel—all the tunnels, even the ones through the Alps—and by the time I woke up we were halfway down to Rome.

In spite of the fact that the tablets remained obstinately blank, I felt more cheerful. Lidia was just a fading memory, I still had twenty-nine days to turn in a new sci-rom and Rome, after all, is still Rome! The center of the universe—well, not counting what new lessons in astronomical geography the Olympians might teach us. At least, it's the greatest city in the world. It's the place where all the action is.

By the time I'd sent the porter for breakfast and changed into a clean robe we were there, and I alighted into the great, noisy train shed.

I hadn't been in the city for several years, but Rome doesn't change much. The Tiber still stank. The big new apartment buildings still hid the old ruins until you were almost on top of them, the flies were still awful and the Roman youths still clustered around the train station to sell you guided tours to the Golden House (as though any of them could ever get past the Legion guards!), or sacred amulets, or their sisters.

Because I used to be a secretary on the staff of the Proconsul to the Cherokee Nation I have friends in Rome. Because I hadn't had the good sense to call ahead, none of them were home. I had no choice. I had to take a room in a high-rise inn on the Palatine.

It was ferociously expensive, of course. Everything in Rome is—that's why people like me live in dreary outposts like London—but I figured that by the time the bills came in I would either have found something

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to satisfy Marcus and get the rest of the advance, or I'd be in so much trouble a few extra debts wouldn't matter.

Having reached that decision, I decided to treat myself to a servant. I picked out a grinning, muscular Sicilian at the rental desk in the lobby, gave him the keys for my luggage and instructed him to take it to my room—and to make me a reservation for the next day's hoverflight to Alexandria.

That's when my luck began to get better.

When the Sicilian came to the wineshop to ask me for further orders he reported, "There's another citizen who's booked on the same flight, Citizen Julius. Would you like to share a compartment with him?"

It's nice when you rent a servant who tries to save you money. I said approvingly, "What kind of a person is he? I don't want to get stuck with some real bore."

"You can see for yourself, Julius. He's in the baths right now. He's a Judaean. His name is Flavius Samuelus."

Five minutes later I had my clothes off and a sheet wrapped around me, and I was in the tepidarium, peering around at every body there.

I picked Sam out at once. He was stretched out with his eyes closed while a masseur pummeled his fat old flesh. I climbed onto the slab next to his without speaking. When he groaned and rolled over, opening his eyes, I said, "Hello, Sam."

It took him a moment to recognize me; he didn't have his glasses in. But when he squinted hard enough his face broke out into a grin. "Julie!" he cried. "Small world! It's good to see you again!"

And he reached out to clasp fists-over-elbows, really welcoming, just as I had expected; because one of the things I like best about Flavius Samuelus is that he likes me.

One of the other things I like best about Sam is that, although he is a competitor, he is also an undepletable natural resource. He writes sci-roms himself. He does more than that. He has helped me with the science part of my own sci-roms any number of times, and it had crossed my mind as soon as I heard the Sicilian say his name that he might be just what I wanted in the present emergency.

Sam is at least seventy years old. His head is hairless. There's a huge, brown age spot on the top of his scalp. His throat hangs in a pouch of flesh, and his eyelids sag. But you'd never guess any of that if you were simply talking to him on the phone. He has the quick, chirpy voice of a twenty-year-old, and the mind of one, too—of an extraordinarily *bright* twenty-year-old. He gets enthusiastic.

That complicates things, because Sam's brain works faster than it ought to. Sometimes that makes him hard to talk to, because he's usually

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three or four exchanges ahead of most people. So the next thing he says to you is as likely as not to be the response to some question that you are inevitably going to ask, but haven't yet thought of.

It is an unpleasant fact of life that Sam's sci-roms sell better than mine do. It is a tribute to Sam's personality that I don't hate him for it. He has an unfair advantage over the rest of us, since he is a professional astronomer himself. He only writes sci-roms for fun, in his spare time, of which he doesn't have a whole lot. Most of his working hours are spent running a space probe of his own, the one that circles the Epsilon Eridani planet, Dione. I can stand his success (and, admit it!, his talent) because he is generous with his ideas. As soon as we had agreed to share the hoverflight compartment I put it to him directly. Well, almost directly; I said, "Sam, I've been wondering about something. When the Olympians get here, what is it going to mean to us?"

He was the right person to ask, of course; Sam knew more about the Olympians than anyone alive. But he was the wrong person to expect a direct answer from. He rose up, clutching his robe around him. He waved away the masseur and looked at me in friendly amusement, out of those bright black eyes under the flyaway eyebrows and the drooping lids. "Why, do you need a new sci-rom plot right now?" he asked.

"Hells," I said ruefully, and decided to come clean. "It wouldn't be the first time I asked you, Sam. Only this time I *really* need it." And I told him the story of the novel the censors obstatted and the editor who was after a quick replacement—or my blood, choice of one.

He nibbled thoughtfully at the knuckle of his thumb. "What was this novel of yours about?" he asked curiously.

"It was a satire, Sam. *An Ass's Olympiad.* About the Olympians coming down to Earth in a matter transporter, only there's a mixup in the transmission and one of them accidentally gets turned into an ass. It's got some funny bits in it."

"It sure has, Julie. Has had for a couple dozen centuries."

"Well, I didn't say it was altogether *original,* only—"

He was shaking his head. "I thought you were smarter than that, Julie. What did you expect the censors to do, jeopardize the most important event in human history for the sake of a dumb sci-rom?"

"It's not a dumb—"

"It's dumb to risk offending them," he said, overruling me firmly. "Best to be safe and not write about them at all."

"But everybody's been doing it!"

"Nobody's been turning them into asses," he pointed out. "Julie, there's a limit to sci-rom speculation. When you write about the Olympians you're right up at that limit. Any speculation about them can be enough

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reason for them to pull out of the meeting entirely, and we might never get a chance like this again."

"They wouldn't—"

"Ah, Julie," he said, disgusted, "you don't have any idea what they would or wouldn't do. The censors made the right decision. Who knows what the Olympians are going to be like?"

"You do," I told him.

He laughed. There was an uneasy sound to it, though. "I wish I did. About the only thing we do know is that they don't appear to just any old intelligent race; they have moral standards. We don't have any idea what those standards are, really. I don't know what your book says, but maybe you speculated that the Olympians were bringing us all kinds of new things—a cure for cancer, new psychedelic drugs, even eternal life—"

"What kind of psychedelic drugs might they bring, exactly?" I asked.

"Down, boy! I'm telling you *not* to think about that kind of idea. The point is that whatever you imagined might easily turn out to be the most repulsive and immoral thing the Olympians can think of. The stakes are too high. This is a once-only chance. We can't let it go sour."

"But I need a *story*," I wailed.

"Well, yes," he admitted, "I suppose you do. Let me think about it. Let's get cleaned up and get out of here."

While we were in the hot drench, while we were dressing, while we were eating a light lunch, Sam chattered on about the forthcoming conference in Alexandria. I was pleased to listen. Apart from the fact that everything he said was interesting, I began to feel hopeful about actually producing a book for Mark. If anybody could help me, Sam could, and he was a problem addict. He couldn't resist a challenge.

That was undoubtedly why he was the first to puzzle out the Olympians' interminably repeated *squees* and *squahs*. If you simply took the "dit" to be "1", and the *squee* to be "+" and the *squah* to be "=", then

Dit *squee* dit *squah* dit dit

simply came out as

1 + 1 = 2

That was easy enough. It didn't take a super-brain like Sam's to substitute our terms for theirs and reveal the message to be simple arithmetic—except for the mysterious "wooooo":

dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squah* wooooo.

What was the "wooooo" supposed to mean? A special convention to represent the number 4?

Sam knew right away, of course. As soon as he heard the message he telegraphed the solution from his library in Padua:

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"The message calls for an answer. 'Wooooo' means question mark. The answer is 4."

And so the reply to the stars was transmitted on its way:
dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squee* dit *squah* dit dit dit dit.

The human race had turned in its test paper in the entrance examination, and the slow process of establishing communication had begun.

It took four years before the Olympians responded. Obviously, they weren't nearby. Also obviously, they weren't simple folk like ourselves, sending out radio messages from a planet of a star two light-years away, because there wasn't any star there; the reply came from a point in space where none of our telescopes or probes had found anything at all.

By then Sam was deeply involved. He was the first to point out that the star folk had undoubtedly chosen to send a weak signal, because they wanted to be sure our technology was reasonably well developed before we tried to answer. He was one of the impatient ones who talked the collegium authorities into beginning transmission of all sorts of mathematical formulae, and then simple word relationships, to start sending *something* to the Olympians while we waited for radio waves to creep to wherever they were and back with an answer.

Sam wasn't the only one, of course. He wasn't even the principal investigator when we got into the hard work of developing a common vocabulary. There were better specialists than Sam at linguistics and cryptanalysis.

But it was Sam who first noticed, early on, that the response time to our messages was getting shorter. Meaning that the Olympians were on their way toward us.

By then they'd begun sending picture mosaics. They came in as strings of dits and dahs, 550,564 bits long. Someone quickly figured out that that was the square of 742, and when they displayed the string as a square matrix, black cells for the dits and white ones for the dahs, the image of the first Olympian leaped out.

Everybody remembers that picture. Everyone on Earth saw it, except for the totally blind—it was on every broadcast screen and news journal in the world—and even the blind listened to the anatomical descriptions every commentator supplied. Two tails. A fleshy, beardlike thing that hung down from its chin. Four legs. A ruff of spikes down what seemed to be the backbone. Eyes set wide apart on bulges from the cheekbones.

That first Olympian was not at all pretty, but it was definitely *alien*.

When the next string turned out very similar to the first, it was Sam who saw at once that it was simply a slightly rotated view of the same being. The Olympians took 41 pictures to give us the complete likeness of that first one in the round. . . .

Then they began sending pictures of the others.

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It had never occurred to anyone, not even Sam, that we would be dealing not with one super-race, but with at least twenty-two of them. There were that many separate forms of alien beings, and each one uglier and more strange than the one before.

That was one of the reasons the priests didn't like calling them "Olympians." We're pretty ecumenical about our gods, but none of them looked anything like any of *those*, and some of the older priests never stopped muttering about blasphemy.

Halfway through the third course of our lunch and the second flask of wine Sam broke off his description of the latest communique from the Olympians—they'd been acknowledging receipt of our transmissions about Earthly history—to lift his head and grin at me.

"Got it," he said.

I turned and blinked at him. Actually, I hadn't been paying a lot of attention to his monologue because I had been keeping my eye on the pretty Kievan waitress. She had attracted my attention because—well, I mean, *after* attracting my attention because of her extremely well developed figure and the sparsity of clothing to conceal it—because she was wearing a gold citizen's amulet around her neck. She wasn't a slave. That made her more intriguing. I can't ever get really interested in slave women, because it isn't sporting, but I had got quite interested in this one.

"Are you listening to me?" Sam demanded testily.

"Of course I am. What have you got?"

"I've got the answer to your problem," he beamed. "Not just a sci-rom novel plot. A whole new *kind* of sci-rom! Why don't you write a book about what it will be like if the Olympians *don't* come?"

I love the way half of Sam's brain works at questions while the other half is doing something completely different, but I can't always follow what comes out of it. "I don't see what you mean. If I write about the Olympians not coming, isn't that just as bad as if I write about them doing it?"

"No, no," he snapped. "Listen to what I say! Leave the Olympians out entirely. Just write about a future that might happen, but won't."

The waitress was hovering over us, picking up used plates. I was conscious of her listening as I responded with dignity. "Sam, that's not my style. My sci-roms may not sell as well as yours do, but I've got just as much integrity. I never write anything that I don't believe is at least possible."

"Julie, get your mind off your gonads—" so he hadn't missed the attention I was giving the girl "—and use that pitifully tiny brain of yours.

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I'm talking about something that *could* be possible, in some alternative future, if you see what I mean."

I didn't see at all. "What's an 'alternative future'?"

"It's a future that *might* happen, but *won't*," he explained. "Like if the Olympians don't come to see us."

I shook my head, puzzled. "But we already know they're coming," I pointed out.

"But suppose they weren't! Suppose they hadn't contacted us years ago."

"But they did," I said, trying to straighten out his thinking on the subject. He only sighed.

"I see I'm not getting through to you," he said, pulling his robe around him and getting to his feet. "Get on with your waitress. I've got some messages to send. I'll see you on the ship."

Well, for one reason or another I didn't get anywhere with the Kievan waitress. She said she was married, happily and monogamously. Well, I couldn't see why any lawful, free husband would have his wife out working at a job like that, but I was surprised she didn't show more interest in one of my lineage—

I'd better explain about that.

You see, my family has a claim to fame. Genealogists say that we are descended from the line of Julius Caesar himself.

I mention that claim myself, sometimes, though usually only when I've been drinking—I suppose it is one of the reasons that Lidia, always a snob, took up with me in the first place. It isn't a serious matter. After all, Julius Caesar died more than two thousand years ago. There have been sixty or seventy generations since then, not to mention the fact that, although Ancestor Julius certainly left a lot of children behind him, none of them happened to be born to a woman he happened to be married to. I don't even look very Roman. There must have been a Northman or two in the line, because I'm tall and fair-haired, which no respectable Roman ever was.

Still, even if I'm not exactly the lawful heir to the divine Julius, I at least come of a pretty ancient and distinguished line. You would have thought a mere waitress would have taken that into account before turning me down.

She hadn't, though. When I woke up the next morning—alone—Sam was gone from the inn, although the skip-ship for Alexandria wasn't due to sail until late evening.

I didn't see him all day. I didn't look for him very hard, because I woke up feeling a little ashamed of myself. Why should a grown man, a cel-

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ebrated author of more than forty best-selling (well, reasonably *well*-selling) sci-roms, depend on somebody else for his ideas?

So I turned my baggage over to the servant, checked out of the inn and took the underground to the Library of Rome.

Rome isn't only the imperial capital of the world, it's the scientific capital, too. The big old telescopes out on the hills aren't much use any more, because the lights from the city spoil their night viewing, and anyway the big optical telescopes are all out in space now. Still, they were where Galileus detected the first extra-solar planet and Tychus made his famous spectrographs of the last great supernova in our own galaxy, only a couple of dozen years after the first spaceflight. The scientific tradition survives. Rome is still the headquarters of the Collegium of Sciences.

That's why the Library of Rome is so great for someone like me. They have direct access to the Collegium database, and you don't even have to pay transmission tolls. I signed myself in, laid out my tablets and stylus on the desk they assigned me and began calling up files.

Somewhere there had to be an idea for a science-adventure romance no one had written yet. . . .

Somewhere there no doubt was, but I couldn't find it. Usually you can get a lot of help from a smart research librarian, but it seemed they'd put on a lot of new people in the Library of Rome—Iberians, mostly; reduced to slave status because they'd taken part in last year's Lusitanian uprising. There were so many Iberians on the market for a while that they depressed the price. I would have bought some as a speculation, knowing that the price would go up—after all, there aren't that many uprisings and the demand for slaves never stops. But I was temporarily short of capital, and besides you have to feed them. If the ones at the Library of Rome were a fair sample, they were no bargains anyway.

I gave up. The weather had improved enough to make a stroll around town attractive, and so I wandered toward the Ostia monorail.

Rome was busy, as always. There was a bullfight going on in the Coliseum and racing at the Circus Maximus. Tourist buses were jamming the narrow streets. A long religious procession was circling the Pantheon, but I didn't get close enough to see which particular gods were being honored today. I don't like crowds. Especially Roman crowds, because there are even more foreigners in Rome than in London, Africs and Hinds, Hans, and Northmen—every race on the face of the Earth sends its tourists to visit the Imperial City. And Rome obliges with spectacles. I paused at one of them, for the changing of the guard at the Golden House. Of course, the Caesar and his wife were nowhere to be seen—off on one of their endless ceremonial tours of the dominions, no doubt, or at least opening a new supermarket somewhere. But the Algonkian fam-

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ily standing in front of me were thrilled as the honor Legions marched and countermarched their standards around the palace. I remembered enough Cherokee to ask the Algonkians where they were from, but the languages aren't really very close and the man's Cherokee was even worse than mine. We just smiled at each other.

As soon as the Legions were out of the way I headed for the train.

I knew in the back of my mind that I should have been worrying about my financial position. The clock was running on my thirty days of grace. I didn't, though. I was buoyed up by a feeling of confidence. Confidence in my good friend Flavius Samuelus who, I knew—no matter what he was doing with most of his brain—was still cogitating an idea for me with some part of it.

It did not occur to me that even Sam had limitations. Or that something so much more important than my own problems was taking up his attention that he didn't have much left for me.

I didn't see Sam come onto the skip-ship, and I didn't see him in our compartment. Even when the ship's fans began to rumble and we slid down the ways into the Tyrrhenian Sea he wasn't there. I dozed off, beginning to worry that he might have missed the boat; but late that night, already asleep, I half woke, just long enough to hear him stumbling in. "I've been on the bridge," he said when I muttered something. "Go back to sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

When I woke, I thought it might have been a dream, because he was up and gone before me. But his bed had been slept in, however briefly, and the cabin steward reassured me when he brought my morning wine. Yes, Citizen Flavius Samuelus was certainly on the hover. He was in the captain's own quarters, as a matter of fact, although what he was doing there the steward could not say.

I spent the morning relaxing on the deck of the hover, soaking in the sun. The ship wasn't exactly a hover any more. We had transited the Sicilian Straits during the night and now, out in the open Mediterranean, the captain had lowered the stilts, pulled up the hover skirts and extended the screws. We were hydrofoiling across the sea at easily a hundred miles an hour. It was a smooth, relaxing ride; the vanes that supported us were twenty feet under the surface of the water, and so there was no wave action to bounce us around.

Lying on my back and squinting up at the warm southern sky, I could see a three-winged airliner rise up from the horizon behind us and gradually overtake us, to disappear ahead of our bows. The plane wasn't going much faster than we were—and we had all the comfort, while they were paying twice as much for passage.

I opened my eyes all the way when I caught a glimpse of someone

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standing beside me. In fact, I sat up quickly, because it was Sam. He looked as though he hadn't had much sleep, and he was holding his floppy sunhat with one hand against the wind of our passage. "Where've you been?" I asked.

"Haven't you been watching the news?" he asked. I shook my head. "The transmissions from the Olympians have stopped," he told me.

I opened my eyes really wide at that, because it was an unpleasant surprise. Still, Sam didn't seem that upset. Displeased, yes. Maybe even a little concerned, but not as shaken up as I was prepared to feel. "It's probably nothing," he said. "It could be just interference from the Sun. It's in Sagittarius now, so it's pretty much between us and them. There's been trouble with static for a couple of days now."

I ventured, "So the transmissions will start up again pretty soon?"

He shrugged and waved to the deck steward for one of those hot decoctions Judaeans like. When he spoke it was on a different topic. "I don't think I made you understand what I meant yesterday," he said. "Let me see if I can explain what I meant by an alternate world. You remember your history? How Fornius Vello conquered the Mayans and Romanized the Western Continents six or seven hundred years ago? Well, suppose he hadn't."

"But he did, Sam."

"I know he did," Sam said patiently. "I'm saying *suppose*. Suppose the Legions had been defeated at the battle of Tehultapec."

I laughed. I was sure he was joking. "The Legions? Defeated? But the Legions have never been defeated."

"That's not true," Sam said in reproof. He hates it when people don't get their facts straight. "Remember Varus."

"Oh, hells, Sam, that was ancient history! When was it, two thousand years ago? In the time of Augustus Caesar? And it was only a temporary defeat, anyway. The Emperor Drusus got the eagles back." And got all of Gaul for the Empire, too. That was one of the first big trans-Alpine conquests. The Gauls are about as Roman as you can get these days, especially when it comes to drinking wine.

He shook his head. "Suppose Fornius Vello had had a 'temporary' defeat, then."

I tried to follow his argument, but it wasn't easy. "What difference would that have made? Sooner or later the Legions would have conquered. They always have, you know."

"That's true," he said reasonably, "but if that particular conquest hadn't happened *then*, the whole course of history would have been different. We wouldn't have had the great westward migrations to fill up those empty continents. The Hans and the Hinds wouldn't have been surrounded on both sides, so they might still be independent nations. It

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would have been a different world. Do you see what I'm driving at? That's what I mean by an 'alternate world'—one that might have happened, but didn't."

I tried to be polite to him. "Sam," I said, "you've just described the difference between a sci-rom and a fantasy. I don't do fantasy. Besides," I went on, not wanting to hurt his feelings, "I don't see how different things would have been, really. I can't believe the world would be changed enough to build a sci-rom plot on."

He gazed blankly at me for a moment, then turned and looked out to sea. Then, without transition, he said, "There's one funny thing. The Martian colonies aren't getting a transmission, either. And they aren't occluded by the Sun."

I frowned. "What does that mean, Sam?"

He shook his head. "I wish I knew," he said.

Chapter 3
In Old Alexandria

The Pharos was bright in the sunset light as we came into the port of Alexandria. We were on hover again, at slow speeds, and the chop at the breakwater bumped us around. But once we got to the inner harbor the water was calm.

Sam had spent the afternoon back in the captain's quarters, keeping in contact with the Collegium of Sciences, but he showed up as we moored. He saw me gazing toward the rental desk on the dock but shook his head. "Don't bother with a rental, Julie," he ordered. "Let my niece's servants take your baggage. We're staying with her."

That was good news. Inn rooms in Alexandria are almost as pricey as Rome's. I thanked him, but he didn't even listen. He turned our bags over to a porter from his niece's domicile, a little Arabian who was a lot stronger than he looked, and disappeared toward the Hall of the Egyptian Senate-Inferior, where the conference was going to be held.

I hailed a three-wheeler and gave the driver the address of Sam's niece.

No matter what the Egyptians think, Alexandria is a dirty little town. The Choctaws have a bigger capital, and the Kievans have a cleaner one. Also Alexandria's famous library is a joke. After my (one would like to believe) ancestor Julius Caesar let it burn to the ground, the Egyptians did build it up again. But it is so old-fashioned that there's nothing in it but books.

The home of Sam's niece was in a particularly run-down section of that run-down town, only a few streets from the harborside. You could hear the noise of the cargo winches from the docks, but you couldn't hear them

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very well because of the noise of the streets themselves, thick with goods vans and drivers cursing each other as they jockeyed around the narrow corners. The house itself was bigger than I had expected. But, at least from the outside, that was all you could say for it. It was faced with cheap Egyptian stucco rather than marble, and right next door to it was a slave-rental barracks.

At least, I reminded myself, it was free. I kicked at the door and shouted for the butler.

It wasn't the butler who opened it for me. It was Sam's niece herself, and she was a nice surprise. She was almost as tall as I was and just as fair. Besides, she was young and very good-looking. "You must be Julius," she said. "I am Rachel, niece of Citizen Flavius Samuelus ben Samuelus, and I welcome you to my home."

I kissed her hand. It's a Kievan custom that I like, especially with pretty girls I don't yet know well, but hope to. "You don't look Judaean," I told her.

"You don't look like a sci-rom hack," she replied. Her voice was less chilling than her words, but not much. "Uncle Sam isn't here, and I'm afraid I've got work I must do. Basilius will show you to your rooms and offer you some refreshment."

I usually make a better first impression on young women. I usually work at it more carefully, but she had taken me by surprise. I had more or less expected that Sam's niece would look more or less like Sam, except probably for the baldness and the wrinkled face. I could not have been more wrong.

I had been wrong about the house, too. It was a big one. There had to be well over a dozen rooms, not counting servants' quarters, and the atrium was covered with one of those partly reflecting films that keep the worst of the heat out.

The famous Egyptian sun was directly overhead when Basilius, Rachel's butler, showed me my rooms. They were pleasingly bright and airy, but Basilius suggested I might enjoy being outside. He was right. He brought wine and fruits to me in the atrium, a pleasant bench by a fountain. Through the film the sun looked only pale and pleasant instead of deadly hot. The fruit was fresh, too—pineapples from Lebanon, oranges from Judaea, apples that must have come all the way from somewhere in Gaul. The only thing wrong that I could see was that Rachel herself stayed in her rooms, so I didn't have a chance to try to put myself in a better light with her.

She had left instructions for my comfort, though. Basilius clapped his hands and another servant appeared, bearing stylus and tablets in case I should decide to work. I was surprised to see that both Basilius and the

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other one were Africs; they don't usually get into political trouble, or trouble with the aediles of any kind, so not many of them are slaves.

The fountain was a Cupid statue. In some circumstances I would have thought of that as a good sign, but here it didn't seem to mean anything. Cupid's nose was chipped, and the fountain was obviously older than Rachel was. I thought of just staying there until Rachel came out, but when I asked Basilius when that would be he gave me a look of delicate patronizing. "Citizeness Rachel works through the afternoon, Citizen Julius," he informed me.

"Oh? And what does she work at?"

"Citizeness Rachel is a famous historian," he said. "She often works straight through until bedtime. But for you and her uncle, of course, dinner will be served at your convenience."

He was quite an obliging fellow. "Thank you, Basilius," I said. "I believe I'll go out for a few hours myself." And then, curiously, as he turned politely to go, I said, "You don't look like a very dangerous criminal. If you don't mind my asking, what were you enslaved for?"

"Oh, not for anything violent, Citizen Julius," he assured me. "Just for debts."

I found my way to the Hall of the Egyptian Senate-Inferior easily enough. There was a lot of traffic going that way, because it is, after all, one of the sights of Alexandria.

The Senate-Inferior wasn't in session at the time. There was no reason it should have been, of course, because what did the Egyptians need a Senate of any kind for? The time when they'd made any significant decisions for themselves was many centuries past.

They'd spread themselves for the conference, though. The Senate Temple had niches for at least half a hundred gods. There were the customary figures of Amon-Ra and Jupiter and all the other main figures of the pantheon, of course, but for the sake of the visitors they had installed Ahura-Mazda, Yahweh, Freya, Quetzalcoatl and at least a dozen I didn't recognize at all. They were all decorated with fresh sacrifices of flowers and fruits, showing that the tourists, if not the astronomers—and probably the astronomers as well—were taking no chances in getting communications with the Olympians restored. Scientists are an agnostic lot, of course—well, most educated people are, aren't they? But even an agnostic will risk a piece of fruit to placate a god, just on the chance he's wrong.

Outside the hall hucksters were already putting up their stands, although the first session wouldn't begin for another day. I bought some dates from one of them and wandered around, eating dates and studying the marble frieze on the wall of the Senate. It showed the rippling fields

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of corn, wheat, and potatoes that had made Egypt the breadbasket of the Empire for two thousand years. It didn't show anything about the Olympians, of course. Space is not a subject that interests the Egyptians a lot. They prefer to look back on their glorious (they *say* it's glorious) past; and there would have been no point in having the conference on the Olympians there at all, except who wants to go to some northern city in December?

Inside, the great hall was empty, except for slaves arranging seat cushions and cuspidors for the participants. The exhibit halls were noisy with workers setting up displays, but they didn't want people dropping in to bother them, and the participants' lounges were dark.

I was lucky enough to find the media room open. It was always good for a free glass of wine, and besides I wanted to know where everyone was. The slave in charge couldn't tell me. "There's supposed to be a private executive meeting somewhere, that's all I know—and there's all these journalists looking for someone to interview." And then, peering over my shoulder as I signed in: "Oh, you're the fellow that writes the sci-roms, aren't you? Well, maybe one of the journalists would settle for you."

It wasn't the most flattering invitation I'd ever had. Still, I didn't say no. Marcus is always after me to do publicity gigs whenever I get the chance, because he thinks it sells books, and it was worthwhile trying to please Marcus just then.

The journalist wasn't much pleased, though. They'd set up a couple of studios in the basement of the Senate, and when I found the one I was directed to the interviewer was fussing over his hairdo in front of a mirror. A couple of technicians were lounging in front of the tube, watching a broadcast comedy series. When I introduced myself the interviewer took his eyes off his own image long enough to cast a doubtful look in my direction.

"You're not a real astronomer," he told me.

I shrugged. I couldn't deny it.

"Still," he grumbled, "I'd better get *some* kind of a spot for the late news. All right. Sit over there, and try to sound as if you know what you're talking about." Then he began telling the technical crew what to do.

That was a strange thing. I'd already noticed that the technicians wore citizens' gold. The interviewer didn't. But he was the one who was giving them orders.

I didn't approve of that at all. I don't like big commercial outfits that put slaves in positions of authority over free citizens. It's a bad practice. Jobs like tutors, college professors, doctors, and so on are fine; slaves can do them as well as a citizen, and usually a lot cheaper. But there's a

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moral issue involved here. A slave must have a master. Otherwise, how can you call him a slave? And when you let the slave *be* the master, even in something as trivial as a broadcasting studio, you strike at the foundations of society.

The other thing is that it isn't fair competition. There are free citizens who need those jobs. We had some of that in my own line of work a few years ago. There were two or three slave authors turning out adventure novels, but the rest of us got together and put a stop to it—especially after Marcus bought one of them to use as a sub-editor. Not one citizen writer would work with her. Mark finally had to put her into the publicity department, where she couldn't do any harm.

So I started the interview with a chip on my shoulder, and his first question made it worse. He plunged right in: "When you're pounding out those sci-roms of yours, do you make any effort to keep in touch with scientific reality? Do you know, for instance, that the Olympians have stopped transmitting?"

I scowled at him, regardless of the cameras. "Science-adventure romances are *about* scientific reality. And the Olympians haven't 'stopped,' as you put it. There's just been a technical hitch of some kind, probably caused by radio interference from our own Sun. As I said in my earlier romance, *The Radio Gods*, electromagnetic impulses are susceptible to—"

He cut me off. "It's been—" he glanced at his watch "—twenty-nine hours since they stopped. That doesn't sound like just a technical hitch."

"Of course it is. There's no reason for them to 'stop.' We've already demonstrated to them that we're truly civilized, first because we're technological, second because we don't fight wars any more—that was cleared up in the first year. As I said in my roman, *The Radio Gods*—"

He gave me a pained look, then turned and winked into the camera. "You can't keep a hack from plugging his books, can you?" he remarked humorously. "But it looks like he doesn't want to use that wild imagination unless he gets paid for it. All I'm asking him for is a guess at why the Olympians don't want to talk to us any more, and all he gives me is commercials."

As though there were any other reason to do interviews! "Look here," I said sharply, "if you can't be courteous when you speak to a citizen I'm not prepared to go on with this conversation at all."

"So be it, pal," he said, icy cold. He turned to the technical crew. "Stop the cameras," he ordered. "We're going back to the studio. This is a waste of time." And we parted on terms of mutual dislike, and once again I had done something that my editor would have been glad to kill me for.

That night at dinner, Sam was no comfort. "He's an unpleasant man, sure," he told me, "but the trouble is, I'm afraid he's right."

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"They've really *stopped*?"

Sam shrugged. "We're not in line with the Sun any more, so that's definitely not the reason. Damn. I was hoping it would be."

"I'm sorry about that, Uncle Sam," Rachel said gently. She was wearing a simple white robe, Hannish silk by the look of it, with no decorations at all. It really looked good on her. I didn't think there was anything under it except for some very well formed female flesh.

"I'm sorry, too," he grumbled. His concerns didn't affect his appetite, though. He was ladling in the first course—a sort of chicken soup, with bits of a kind of pastry floating in it—and, for that matter, so was I. Whatever Rachel's faults might be, she had a good cook. It was plain home cooking, none of your partridge-in-a-rabbit-inside-a-boar kind of thing, but well prepared and expertly served by her butler, Basilius. "Anyway," Sam said, mopping up the last of the broth, "I've figured it out."

"Why the Olympians stopped?" I asked, to encourage him to go on with the revelation.

"No, no! I mean about your romance, Julie. My alternate world idea. If you don't want to write about a different *future*, how about a different *now*?"

I didn't get a chance to ask him what he was talking about, because Rachel beat me to it. "There's only one 'now,' Sam, dear," she pointed out. I couldn't have said it better myself.

Sam groaned. "Not you, too, honey," he complained. "I'm talking about a new kind of sci-rom."

"I don't read many sci-roms," she apologized, in the tone that isn't an apology at all.

He ignored that. "You're a historian, aren't you?" She didn't bother to confirm it; obviously, it was the thing she was that shaped her life. "So what if history had gone a different way?"

He beamed at us as happily as though he had said something that made sense. Neither of us beamed back. Rachel pointed out the flaw in his remark. "It didn't, though," she told him.

"I said *suppose*! This isn't the only possible 'now,' it's just the one that happened to occur! There could have been a million different ones. Look at all the events in the past that could have gone a different way. Suppose Annius Publius hadn't discovered the Western Continents in City Year 1820. Suppose Caesar Publius Terminus hadn't decreed the development of a space program in 2122. Don't you see what I'm driving at? What kind of a world would we be living in now if those things hadn't happened?"

Rachel opened her mouth to speak, but she was saved by the butler. He appeared in the doorway with a look of silent appeal. When she

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excused herself to see what was needed in the kitchen, that left it up to me. "I never wrote anything like that, Sam," I told him. "I don't know anybody else who did, either."

"That's exactly what I'm driving at! It would be something completely *new* in sci-roms. Don't you want to pioneer a whole new kind of story?"

Out of the wisdom of experience, I told him, "Pioneers don't make any money, Sam." He scowled at me. "You could write it yourself," I suggested.

That just changed the annoyance to gloom. "I wish I could. But until this business with the Olympians is cleared up I'm not going to have much time for sci-roms. No, it's up to you, Julie."

Then Rachel came back in, looking pleased with herself, followed by Basilius bearing a huge silver platter containing the main course.

Sam cheered up at once. So did I. The main dish was a whole roasted baby kid, and I realized that the reason Rachel had been called into the kitchen was so that she could weave a garland of flowers around its tiny baby horn buds herself. The maidservant followed with a pitcher of wine, replenishing all our goblets. All in all, we were busy enough eating to stop any conversation but compliments on the food.

Then Sam looked at his watch. "Great dinner, Rachel," he told his niece, "but I've got to get back. What about it?"

"What about what?" she asked.

"About helping poor Julie with some historical turning points he can use in a story?"

He hadn't listened to a word I'd said. I didn't have to say so, because Rachel was looking concerned. She said apologetically, "I don't know anything about those periods you were talking about—Publius Terminus and so on. My specialty is the immediate post-Augustan period, when the Senate came back to power."

"Fine," he said, pleased with himself and showing it. "That's as good a period as any. Think how different things might be now if some little event then had gone in a different way. Say, if Augustus hadn't married the Lady Livia and adopted her son Drusus to succeed him." He turned to me, encouraging me to take fire from his spark of inspiration. "I'm sure you see the possibilities, Julie! Tell you what you should do. The night's young yet; take Rachel out dancing or something; have a few drinks; listen to her talk. What's wrong with that? You two young people ought to be having fun, anyway!"

That was definitely the most intelligent thing intelligent Sam had said in days.

So I thought, anyway, and Rachel was a good enough niece to heed her uncle's advice. Because I was a stranger in town, I had to let her

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pick the place. After the first couple she mentioned I realized that she was tactfully trying to spare my pocketbook. I couldn't allow that. After all, a night on the town with Rachel was probably cheaper, and anyway a whole lot more interesting, than the cost of an inn and meals.

We settled on a place right on the harborside, out toward the breakwater. It was a revolving night club on top of an inn built along the style of one of the old Pyramids. As the room slowly turned we saw the lights of the city of Alexandria, the shipping in the harbor, then the wide sea itself, its gentle waves reflecting starlight.

I was prepared to forget the whole idea of "alternate worlds," but Rachel was more dutiful than that. After the first dance, she said, "I think I can help you. There was something that happened in Drusus's reign—"

"Do we have to talk about that?" I asked, refilling her glass.

"But Uncle Sam said we should. I thought you wanted to try a new kind of sci-rom."

"No, that's your uncle that wants that. See, there's a bit of a problem here. It's true that editors are always begging for something new and different, but if you're dumb enough to try to give it to them they don't recognize it. When they ask for 'different,' what they mean is something right down the good old 'different' groove."

"I think," she informed me, with the certainty of an oracle and a lot less confusion of style, "that when my uncle has an idea, it's usually a good one." I didn't want to argue with her; I didn't even disagree, at least usually. I let her talk. "You see," she said, "my specialty is the transfer of power throughout early Roman history. What I'm studying right now is the Judaean Diaspora, after Drusus's reign. You know what happened then, I suppose?"

Actually, I did—hazily. "That was the year of the Judaean rebellion, wasn't it?"

She nodded. She looked very pretty when she nodded, her fair hair moving gracefully and her eyes sparkling. "You see, that was a great tragedy for the Judaeans, and, just as my uncle said, it needn't have happened. If Procurator Tiberius had lived, it wouldn't."

I coughed. "I'm not sure I know who Tiberius was," I said apologetically.

"He was the Procurator of Judaea, and a very good one. He was just and fair. He was the brother of the Emperor Drusus—the one my uncle was talking about, Livia's son, the adopted heir of Caesar Augustus. The one who restored the power of the Senate after Augustus had appropriated most of it for himself. Anyway, Tiberius was the best governor the Judaeans ever had, just as Drusus was the best emperor. Tiberius died just a year before the rebellion—ate some spoiled figs, they say, although

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it might have been his wife that did it—she was Julia, the daughter of Augustus by his first wife—"

I signaled distress. "I'm getting a little confused by all these names," I admitted.

"Well, the important one to remember is Tiberius, and you know who he was. If he had lived the rebellion probably wouldn't have happened. Then there wouldn't have been a Diaspora."

"I see," I said. "Would you like another dance?"

She frowned at me, then smiled. "Maybe that's not such an interesting subject—unless you're a Judaean, anyway," she said. "All right, let's dance."

That was the best idea yet. It gave me a chance to confirm with my fingers what my eyes, ears, and nose had already told me; this was a very attractive young woman. She had insisted on changing, but fortunately the new gown was as soft and clinging as the old, and the palms of my hands rejoiced in the tactile pleasures of her back and arm. I whispered, "I'm sorry if I sound stupid. I really don't know a whole lot about early history—you know, the first thousand years or so after the Founding of the City."

She didn't bother to point out that she did. She moved with me to the music, very enjoyably, then she straightened up. "I've got a different idea," she announced. "Let's go back to the booth." And she was already telling it to me as we left the dance floor: "Let's talk about your own ancestor, Julius Caesar. He conquered Egypt, right here in Alexandria. But suppose the Egyptians had defeated him instead, as they very nearly did?"

I was paying close attention now—obviously she had been interested enough in me to ask Sam some questions! "They couldn't have," I told her. "Julius never lost a war. Anyway—" I discovered to my surprise that I was beginning to take Sam's nutty idea seriously "—that would be a really hard one to write, wouldn't it? If the Legions had been defeated, it would have changed the whole world. Can you imagine a world that isn't Roman?"

She said sweetly, "No, but that's more your job than mine, isn't it?"

I shook my head. "It's too bizarre," I complained. "I couldn't make the readers believe it."

"You could try, Julius," she told me. "You see, there's an interesting possibility there. Drusus almost didn't live to become Emperor. He was severely wounded in a war in Gaul, while Augustus was still alive. Tiberius—you remember Tiberius—"

"Yes, yes, his brother. The one you like. The one he made Procurator of Judaea."

"That's the one. Well, Tiberius rode day and night to bring Drusus the

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best doctors in Rome. He almost didn't make it. They barely pulled Drusus through."

"Yes?" I said encouragingly. "And what then?"

She looked uncertain. "Well, I don't know what then."

I poured some more wine. "I guess I could figure out some kind of speculative idea," I said, ruminating. "Especially if you would help me with some of the details. I suppose Tiberius would have become Emperor instead of Drusus. You say he was a good man; so probably he would have done more or less what Drusus did—restore the power of the Senate, after Augustus and my revered great-great Julius between them had pretty nearly put it out of business—"

I stopped there, startled at my own words. It almost seemed that I was beginning to take Sam's crazy idea seriously!

On the other hand, that wasn't all bad. It also seemed that Rachel was beginning to take *me* seriously.

That was a good thought. It kept me cheerful through half a dozen more dances and at least another hour's of history lessons from her pretty lips . . . right up until the time when, after we had gone back to her house, I tiptoed out of my room toward hers, and found her butler, Basilius, asleep on a rug across her doorway, with a great, thick club by his side.

I didn't sleep well that night.

Partly it was glandular. My head knew that Rachel didn't want me creeping into her bedroom, or else she wouldn't have put the butler there in the way. But my glands weren't happy with that news. They had soaked up the smell and sight and feel of her, and they were complaining about being thwarted.

The worst part was waking up every hour or so to contemplate financial ruin.

Being poor wasn't so bad. Every writer has to learn how to be poor from time to time, between checks. It's an annoyance, but not a catastrophe. You don't get enslaved just for poverty.

But I had been running up some pretty big bills. And you do get enslaved for debt.

Chapter 4
The End of the Dream

The next morning I woke up late and grouchy and had to take a three-wheeler to the Hall of the Senate-Inferior.

It was slow going. As we approached, the traffic thickened even more. I could see the Legion forming for the ceremonial guard as the Pharaoh's

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procession approached to open the ceremonies. The driver wouldn't take me any closer than the outer square, and I had to wait there with all the tourists, while the Pharaoh dismounted from her royal litter.

There was a soft, pleasured noise from the crowd, halfway between a giggle and a sigh. That was the spectacle the tourists had come to see. They pressed against the sheathed swords of the Legionaries while the Pharaoh, head bare, robe trailing on the ground, advanced on the shrines outside the Senate building. She sacrificed reverently and unhurriedly to them, while the tourists flashed their cameras at her, and I began to worry about the time. What if she ecumenically decided to visit all fifty shrines? But after doing Isis, Amon-Ra, and Mother Nile, she went inside to declare the Congress open. The Legionaries relaxed. The tourists began to flow back to their buses, snapping pictures of themselves now, and I followed the Pharaoh inside.

She made a good, by which I mean short, opening address. The only thing wrong with it was that she was talking to mostly empty seats.

The Hall of the Alexandrian Senate-Inferior holds two thousand people. There weren't more than a hundred and fifty in it. Most of those were huddled in small groups in the aisles and at the back of the hall, and they were paying no attention at all to the Pharaoh. I think she saw that and shortened her speech. At one moment she was telling us how the scientific investigation of the outside universe was completely in accord with the ancient traditions of Egypt—with hardly anyone listening—and at the next her voice had stopped without warning and she was handing her orb and scepter to her attendants. She proceeded regally across the stage and out the wings.

The buzz of conversation hardly slackened. What they were talking about, of course, was the Olympians. Even when the Collegium-Presidor stepped forward and called for the first session to begin the hall didn't fill. At least most of the scattered groups of people in the room sat down—though still in clumps, and still doing a lot of whispering to each other.

Even the speakers didn't seem very interested in what they were saying. The first one was an honorary Presidor-Emeritus from the southern highlands of Egypt, and he gave us a review of everything we knew about the Olympians.

He read it as hurriedly as though he were dictating it to a scribe. It wasn't very interesting. The trouble, of course, was that his paper had been prepared days earlier, while the Olympian transmissions were still flooding in and no one had any thought they might be interrupted. It just didn't seem relevant any more.

What I like about going to science congresses isn't so much the actual papers the speakers deliver—I can get that sort of information better

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from the journals in the library. It isn't even the back-and-forth discussion that follows each paper, although that sometimes produces useful background bits. What I get the most out of is what I call "the sound of science"—the kind of shorthand language scientists use when they're talking to each other about their own specialties. So I usually sit somewhere at the back of the hall, with as much space around me as I can manage, my tablet in my lap and my stylus in my hand, writing down bits of dialogue and figuring how to put them into my next sci-rom.

There wasn't much of that today. There wasn't much discussion at all. One by one the speakers got up and read their papers, answered a couple of cursory questions with cursory replies and hurried off; and when each one finished he left and the audience got smaller, because, as I finally figured out, no one was there who wasn't obligated to be.

When boredom made me decide that I needed a glass of wine and a quick snack more than I needed to sit there with my still blank tablet I found out there was hardly anyone even in the lounges. There was no familiar face. No one seemed to know where Sam was. And in the afternoon, the Presidor, bowing to the inevitable, announced that the remaining sessions would be postponed indefinitely.

The day was a total waste.

I had a lot more hopes for the night.

Rachel greeted me with the news that Sam had sent a message to say that he was detained and wouldn't make dinner.

"Did he say where he was?" She shook her head. "He's off with some of the other top people," I guessed. I told her about the collapse of the convention. Then I brightened. "At least let's go out for dinner, then," I offered.

Rachel firmly vetoed the idea. She was tactful enough not to mention money, although I was sure Sam had filled her in on my precarious financial state. "I like my own cook's food better than any restaurant," she told me. "We'll eat here. There won't be anything fancy tonight—just a simple meal for the two of us."

The best part of that was "the two of us." Basilius had arranged the couches in a sort of Vee, so that our heads were quite close together, with the low serving tables in easy reach between us. As soon as she lay down Rachel confessed, "I didn't get a lot of work done today. I couldn't get that idea of yours out of my head."

The idea was Sam's, actually, but I didn't see any reason to correct her. "I'm flattered," I told her. "I'm sorry I spoiled your work."

She shrugged and went on, "I did a little reading on the period, especially about an interesting minor figure who lived around then, a Judaean preacher named Jeshua of Nazareth. Did you ever hear of him?

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Well, most people haven't, but he had a lot of followers at one time. They called themselves Chrestians, and they were a very unruly bunch."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about Judaean history," I said. Which was true; but then I added, "But I'd really like to learn more." Which wasn't; or at least hadn't been until just then.

"Of course," Rachel said. No doubt to her it seemed quite natural that everyone in the world would wish to know more about the post-Augustan period. "Anyway, this Jeshua was on trial for sedition. He was condemned to death."

I blinked at her. "Not just to slavery?"

She shook her head. "They didn't just enslave criminals back then, they did physical things to them. Even executed them, sometimes in very barbarous ways. But Tiberius, as Proconsul, decided that the penalty was too extreme. So he commuted Jeshua's death sentence. He just had him whipped and let him go. A very good decision, I think. Otherwise he would have made him a martyr, and gods know what would have happened after that. As it was, the Chrestians just gradually waned away. . . . Basilius? You can bring the next course in now."

I watched with interest as Basilius complied. It turned out to be larks and olives! I approved, not simply for the fact that I liked the dish. The "simple meal" was actually a lot more elaborate than she had provided for the three of us the night before.

Things were looking up. I said, "Can you tell me something, Rachel? I think you're Judaean yourself, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Well, I'm a little confused," I said. "I thought the Judaeans believed in the god Yahveh."

"Of course, Julie. We do."

"Yes, but—" I hesitated. I didn't want to mess up the way things were going, but I was curious. "But you say 'gods.' Isn't that, well, a contradiction?"

"Not at all," she told me, civilly enough. "Yahveh's commandments were brought down from a mountaintop by our great prophet, Moses, and they are very clear on the subject. One of them says, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' Well, we don't, you see? Yahveh is our *first* god. There aren't any *before* him. It's all explained in the rabbinical writings."

"And that's what you go by, the rabbinical writings?"

She looked thoughtful. "In a way. We're a very traditional people, Julie. Tradition is what we follow; the rabbinical writings simply explain the traditions."

She had stopped eating. I stopped, too. Dreamily I reached out to caress her cheek.

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She didn't pull away. She didn't respond, either. After a moment, she said, not looking at me, "For instance, there is a Judaean tradition that a woman is to be a virgin at the time of her marriage."

My hand came away from her face by itself, without any conscious command from me. "Oh?"

"And the rabbinical writings more or less define the tradition, you see. They say that the head of the household is to stand guard at an unmarried daughter's bedroom for the first hour of each night; if there is no male head of the household, a trusted slave is to be appointed to the job."

"I see," I said. "You've never been married, have you?"

"Not yet," said Rachel, beginning to eat again.

I hadn't ever been married, either, although, to be sure, I wasn't exactly a virgin. It wasn't that I had anything against marriage. It was only that the life of a sci-rom hack wasn't what you would call exactly financially stable, and also the fact that I hadn't ever come across the woman I wanted to spend my life with . . . or, to quote Rachel, "not yet."

I tried to keep my mind off that subject. It was sure that if my finances had been precarious before, they were now close to catastrophic.

The next morning I wondered what to do with my day, but Rachel settled it for me. She was waiting for me in the atrium. "Sit down with me, Julie," she commanded, patting the bench beside her. "I was up late, thinking, and I think I've got something for you. Suppose this man Jeshua had been executed after all."

It wasn't exactly the greeting I had been hoping for, nor was it something I had given a moment's thought to, either. But I was glad enough to sit next to her in that pleasant little garden, with the gentled early sun shining down on us through the translucent shades. "Yes?" I said noncommittally, kissing her hand in greeting.

She took a moment before she took her hand back. "That idea opened some interesting possibilities, Julie. Jeshua would have been a martyr, you see. I can easily imagine that under those circumstances his Chrestian followers would have had a lot more staying power. They might even have grown to be really important. Judaea was always in one kind of turmoil or another around that time, anyway—there were all sorts of prophecies and rumors about messiahs and changes in society. The Chrestians might even have come to dominate all of Judaea."

I tried to be tactful. "There's nothing wrong with being proud of your ancestors, Rachel. But, really, what difference would that have made?" I obviously hadn't been tactful enough. She had turned to look at me with what looked like the beginning of a frown. I thought fast, and tried to cover myself: "On the other hand," I went on quickly, "suppose you expanded that idea beyond Judaea."

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It turned into a real frown, but puzzled rather than angry. "What do you mean, beyond Judaea?"

"Well, suppose Jeshua's Chrestian-Judaean kind of—what would you call it? Philosophy? Religion?"

"A little of both, I'd say."

"Religious philosophy, then. Suppose it spread over most of the world, not just Judaea. That could be interesting."

"But, really, no such thing hap—"

"Rachel, Rachel," I said, covering her mouth with a fingertip affectionately, "we're saying *what if*, remember? Every sci-rom writer is entitled to one big lie. Let's say this is mine. Let's say that Chrestian-Judaeanism became a world religion. Even Rome itself succumbs. Maybe the City becomes the, what do you call it, the place for the Sanhedrin of the Chrestian-Judaeans. And then what happens?"

"You tell me," she said, half amused, half suspicious.

"Why, then," I said, flexing the imagination of the trained sci-rom writer, "it might develop like the kind of conditions you've been talking about in the old days in Judaea. Maybe the whole world would be splintering into factions and sects, and then they fight."

"Fight *wars?*" she asked incredulously.

"Fight *big* wars. Why not? It happened in Judaea, didn't it? And then they might keep right on fighting them, all through historical times. After all, the only thing that's kept the world united for the past two thousand years has been the Pax Romana. Without that— Why, without that," I went on, talking faster and making mental notes to myself as I went along, "let's say that all the tribes of Europe turned into independent city-states. Like the Greeks, only bigger. And more powerful. And they fight, the Franks against the Vik Northmen against the Belgiae against the Kelts."

She was shaking her head. "People wouldn't be so silly, Julie," she complained.

"How do you know that? Anyway, this is a sci-rom, dear." I didn't pause to see if she reacted to the "dear." I went right on, but not failing to notice that she hadn't objected: "The people will be as silly as I want them to be—as long as I can make it plausible enough for the fans. But you haven't heard the best part of it. Let's say the Chrestian-Judaeans take their religion seriously. They don't do anything to go against the will of their god. What Yahveh said still goes, no matter what. Do you follow? That means they aren't at all interested in scientific discovery, for instance."

"No, stop right there!" she ordered, suddenly indignant. "Are you trying to say that we Judaeans aren't interested in science? That I'm not? Or my Uncle Sam? And we're certainly Judaeans."

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"But you're not *Chrestian* Judaeans, sweet. There's a big difference. Why? Because I say there is, Rachel, and I'm the one writing the story. So, let's see—" I paused for thought "—all right, let's say the Chrestians go through a long period of intellectual stagnation, and then—" I paused, not because I didn't know what was coming next, but to build the effect. "And then along come the Olympians!"

She gazed at me blankly. "Yes?" she asked, encouraging but vague.

"Don't you see it? And then this Chrestian-Judaean world, drowsing along in the middle of a pre-scientific dark age, no aircraft, no electronic broadcast, not even a printing press or a hovermachine—and it's suddenly thrown into contact with a super-technological civilization from outer space!" She was wrinkling her forehead at me, forgetting to eat, trying to understand what I was driving at. "It's terrible culture shock," I explained. "And not just for the people on Earth. Maybe the Olympians come to look us over, and they see that we're technologically backward and divided into warring nations and all that . . . and what do they do? Why, they turn right around and leave us! and . . . and that's the end of the book!"

She pursed her lips. "But maybe that's what they're doing now," she said cautiously.

"But not for that reason, certainly. See, this isn't *our* world I'm talking about. It's a *what if* world."

"It sounds a little far-fetched," she said.

I said happily, "That's where my skills come in. You don't understand sci-rom, sweetheart. It's the sci-rom writer's job to push an idea as far as it will go—to the absolute limit of credibility—to the point where if he took just one step more the whole thing would collapse into absurdity. Trust me, Rachel. I'll make them believe it."

She was still pursing her pretty lips, but this time I didn't wait for her to speak. I seized the bird of opportunity on the wing. I leaned toward her and kissed those lips, as I had been wanting to do for some time. Then I said, "I've got to get to a scribe, I want to get all this down before I forget it. I'll be back when I can be, and— And until then—well, here."

And I kissed her again, gently, firmly, and long; and it was quite clear early in the process that she was kissing me back.

Being next to a rental barracks had its advantages. I found a scribe to rent at a decent price, and the rental manager even let me borrow one of their conference rooms that night to dictate in. By daybreak I had the first two chapters and an outline of *Sidewise to a Chrestian World* down.

Once I get that far in a book, the rest is just work. The general idea is set, the characters have announced themselves to me, it's just a matter of closing my eyes for a moment to see what's going to be happening and

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then opening them to dictate to the scribe. In this case, the scribes, plural, because the first one wore out in a few more hours and I had to employ a second, and then a third.

I didn't sleep at all until it was all down. I think it was fifty-two straight hours, the longest I'd worked in one stretch in years. When it was all done I left it to be fair-copied. The rental agent agreed to get it down to the shipping offices by the harbor and dispatch it by fast air to Marcus in London.

Then at last I stumbled back to Rachel's house to sleep. I was surprised to find that it was still dark, an hour or more before sunrise.

Basilius let me in, looking startled as he studied my sunken eyes and unshaved face. "Let me sleep until I wake up," I ordered. There was a journal neatly folded beside my bed, but I didn't look at it. I lay down, turned over once, and was gone.

When I woke up at least twelve hours had passed. I had Basilius bring me something to eat, and shave me, and when I finally got out to the atrium it was nearly sundown and Rachel was waiting for me. I told her what I'd done, and she told me about the last message from the Olympians. "Last?" I objected. "How can you be sure it's the last?"

"Because they said so," she told me sadly. "They said they were breaking off communications."

"Oh," I said, thinking about that. "Poor Sam," I said, thinking about Flavius Samuelus. And she looked so doleful that I couldn't help myself, I took her in my arms.

Consolation turned to kissing, and when we had done quite a lot of that she leaned back, smiling at me.

I couldn't help what I said then, either. It startled me to hear the words come out of my mouth as I said, "Rachel, I wish we could get married."

She pulled back, looking at me with affection and a little surprised amusement. "Are you proposing to me?"

I was careful of my grammar. "That was a subjunctive, sweet. I said I *wished* we could get married."

"I understood that. What I want to know is whether you're asking me to grant your wish."

"No—well, hells, yes! But what I wish first is that I had the right to ask you. Sci-rom writers don't have the most solid financial situation, you know. The way you live here—"

"The way I live here," she said, "is paid for by the estate I inherited from my father. Getting married won't take it away."

"But that's your estate, my darling. I've been poor, but I've never been a parasite."

"You won't be a parasite," she said softly, and I realized that she was being careful about her grammar, too.

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Which took a lot of will-power on my part. "Rachel," I said, "I should be hearing from my editor any time now. If this new kind of sci-rom catches on— If it's as popular as it might be—"

"Yes?" she prompted.

"Why," I said, "then maybe I can actually ask you. But I don't know that. Marcus probably has it by now, but I don't know if he's read it. And then I won't know his decision till I hear from him. And now, with all the confusion about the Olympians, that might take weeks—"

"Julie," she said, putting her finger over my lips, "call him up."

The circuits were all busy, but I finally got through—and, because it was well after lunch, Marcus was in his office. More than that, he was quite sober. "Julie, you bastard," he cried, sounding really furious, "where the hells have you been hiding? I ought to have you whipped."

But he hadn't said anything about getting the aediles after me. "Did you have a chance to read *Sidewise to a Chrestian World*?" I asked.

"The what? Oh, *that* thing. Nah. I haven't even looked at it. I'll buy it, naturally," he said, "but what I'm talking about is *An Ass's Olympiad*. The censors won't stop it now, you know. In fact, all I want you to do now is make the Olympian a little dumber, a little nastier—you've got a biggie here, Julie! I think we can get a broadcast out of it, even. So when can you get back here to fix it up?"

"Why— Well, pretty soon, I guess, only I haven't checked the hover timetable—"

"Hover, hell! You're coming back by fast plane—we'll pick up the tab. And, oh, by the way, we're doubling your advance. The payment will be in your account this afternoon."

And ten minutes later, when I unsubjunctively proposed to Rachel, she quickly and unsubjunctively accepted; and the high-speed flight to London takes nine hours, but I was grinning all the way.

Chapter 5
The Way It Is When You've Got It Made

To be a freelance writer is to live in a certain kind of ease. Not very easeful financially, maybe, but in a lot of other ways. You don't have to go to an office every day, you get a lot of satisfaction out of seeing your very own words being read on hovers and trains by total strangers. To be a potentially *bestselling* writer is a whole order of magnitude different. Marcus put me up in an inn right next to the publishing company's offices and stood over me while I turned my poor imaginary Olympian into the most doltish, feckless, unlikeable being the universe had ever

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seen. The more I made the Olympian contemptibly comic, the more Marcus loved it. So did everyone else in the office; so did their affiliates in Kiev and Manahattan and Kalkut and half a dozen other cities all around the world, and he informed me proudly that they were publishing my book simultaneously in all of them. "We'll be the first ones out, Julie," he exulted. "It's going to be a mint! Money? Well, of course you can have more money—you're in the big time now!" And, yes, the broadcast studios were interested—interested enough to sign a contract even before I'd finished the revisions; and so were the journals, who came for interviews every minute that Marcus would let me off from correcting the proofs and posing for jacket photographs and speaking to their sales staff; and, all in all, I hardly had a chance to breathe until I was back on the high-speed aircraft to Alexandria and my bride.

Sam had agreed to give the bride away, and he met me at the airpad. He looked older and more tired, but resigned. As we drove to Rachel's house, where the wedding guests were already beginning to gather, I tried to cheer him up. I had plenty of joy myself; I wanted to share it. So I offered, "At least, now you can get back to your real work."

He looked at me strangely. "Writing sci-roms?" he asked.

"No, of course not! That's good enough for me, but you've still got your extra-solar probe to keep you busy."

"Julie," he said sadly, "where have you been lately? Didn't you see the last Olympian message?"

"Well, sure," I said, offended. "Everybody did, didn't they?" And then I thought for a moment, and, actually, it had been Rachel who had told me about it. I'd never actually looked at a journal or a broadcast. "I guess I was pretty busy," I said lamely.

He looked sadder than ever. "Then maybe you don't know that they said they weren't only terminating all their own transmissions to us, they were terminating even our own probes."

"Oh, no, Sam! I would have heard if they'd stopped transmitting!"

He said patiently, "No, you wouldn't, because the data they were sending is still on its way to us. We've still got a few years coming in. But that's it. We're out of interstellar space, Julie. They don't want us there."

He broke off, peering out the window. "And that's the way it is," he said. "We're here, though, and you better get inside. Rachel's going to be tired of sitting under that canopy without you around."

The greatest thing of all about being a bestselling author, if you like traveling, is that when you fly around the world somebody else pays for the tickets. Marcus's publicity department fixed up the whole thing. Personal appearances, bookstore autographings, college lectures, broad-

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casts, publishers' meetings, receptions—we were kept busy for a solid month, and it made a hell of a fine honeymoon.

Of course any honeymoon would have been wonderful as long as Rachel was the bride, but without the publishers bankrolling us we might not have visited six of the seven continents on the way. (We didn't bother with Polaris Australis—nobody there but penguins.) And we took time for ourselves along the way, on beaches in Hindia and the islands of Han, in the wonderful shops of Manahattan and a dozen other cities of the Western Continents—we did it all.

When we got back to Alexandria the contractors had finished the remodeling of Rachel's villa—which, we had decided, would now be our winter home, though our next priority was going to be to find a place where we could spend the busy part of the year in London. Sam had moved back in and, with Basilius, greeted us formally as we came to the door.

"I thought you'd be in Rome," I told him, once we were settled and Rachel had gone to inspect what had been done with her baths.

"Not while I'm still trying to understand what went wrong," he said. "The research is going on right here; this is where we transmitted from."

I shrugged and took a sip of the Falernian wine Basilius had left for us. I held the goblet up critically: a little cloudy, I thought, and in the vat too long. And then I grinned at myself, because a few weeks earlier I would have been delighted at anything so costly. "But we know what went wrong," I told him reasonably. "They decided against us."

"Of course they did," he said, "but why? I've been trying to work out just what messages were being received when they broke off communications."

"Do you think we said something to offend them?"

He scratched the age spot on his bald head, staring at me, then he sighed. "What would *you* think, Julius?"

"Well, maybe so," I admitted. "What messages were they?"

"I'm not sure. It took a lot of digging. The Olympians, you know, acknowledged receipt of each message by repeating the last hundred and forty groups—"

"I didn't know."

"Well, they did. The last message they acknowledged was a history of Rome. Unfortunately, it was six hundred and fifty thousand words long."

"So you have to read the whole history?"

"Not just *read* it, Julie; we have to try to figure out what might have been in it that wasn't in any previous message. We've had two or three hundred researchers collating every previous message, and the only thing that was new was some of the social data. We were transmitting census figures—so many of equestrian rank, so many citizens, so many freed-

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men, so many slaves." He hesitated, and then said thoughtfully, "Paulus Magnus—I don't know if you know him, he's an Algonkan—pointed out that that was the first time we'd ever mentioned slavery."

I waited for him to go on. "Yes?" I said encouragingly.

He shrugged. "Nothing. Paulus is a slave himself, so naturally he's got it on his mind a lot."

"I don't quite see what that has to do with anything," I said. "Isn't there anything else?"

"Oh," he said, "there are a thousand theories. There was some health data, too, and some people think the Olympians might have suddenly got worried about some new microorganism killing them off. Or we weren't polite enough. Or maybe, who knows, there was some sort of power struggle among them, and the side that came out on top just didn't want any more new races in their community."

"And we don't know yet which it was?"

"It's worse than that, Julie," he told me somberly. "I don't think we ever will find out what it was that made them decide they didn't want to have anything to do with us;" and in that, too, Flavius Samuelus ben Samuelus was a very intelligent man. Because we never have. ●

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BEYOND PROCREATION

Sophisticated and illiterate,
these children who call themselves
"the last generation"
have borrowed the surgeon's scalpel
and the tattoo artist's ink

to artificially transform
their bodies beyond any semblance
to the species known as human;
in a fierce finale of revenge
against the weight of their

inheritance and those who have
delivered it upon them,
against the sexual plagues
and the phallic stockpiles,
against the torn stratosphere

and the torpid yellow seas,
they now come of age telling
age they know the game already,
rough young beasts slouching
the streets with their scarred

and brightly sloganed flesh
bared to the poisonous
ultraviolet of the day,
not towards any Bethlehem
but aimlessly back and forth,

anticipating the ultimate flash
dance of some genocidal pulse
to fulfill the prophecy
and justify the mean extent
of their own deformation.

—Bruce Boston

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Misguided Light

An Alien Light
By Nancy Kress
Arbor House, $18.95

How you feel about Nancy Kress's *An Alien Light* will very much depend on how you feel about misunderstanding as a literary device.

"Aargh," growls the reader. "Tell us not of literary devices. Just tell us what it's about, pliz."

Well, that's the problem. The novel's all about misunderstanding—or misconceptions—or (to get really fancy) the limitations placed on comprehension by cultural or racial orientations.

"So that tells me a whole lot. What's it *about*?"

Okay. Okay. I'll make the point later. The Ged are your perfectly ordinary, three-eyed aliens at war with humanity. They are also baffled by humanity, because their vast experience with alien races does not include *one* that both practices intraspecies violence and makes it past discovering atomic energy without blowing itself up. By the Ged's standards, humanity should not exist.

By luck, the Ged discover a castaway culture of humans, which does not remember its origins (from a wrecked interstellar ship still spewing radiation after many generations). *Two* cultures, to be exact: the city-states of Jela and Delysia. Jela is a communal culture geared to the values of war (read Sparta). Delysia has a *laissez-faire* culture and economy, highly competitive and individualistic, where anything can be bought and sold (read Athens); it has developed some arts and crafts.

The Ged build on this world a huge structure as a sort of lab; into it they lure representatives of both Delysia and Jela with promises of jewels and weaponry. Those that pass a test in logic and curiosity are kept, nurtured, and taught elementary physics, biology, and medicine. The point for the Ged is to figure out how humans work, since they are winning the war against the Ged with their unknown psychology.

The story is devoted to the conflicts and misunderstandings among Ged, Delysians, and Jelites, all of whom consider their own manners, mores, beliefs, and customs the only *right* way of doing things; any other is insane or immoral or both. The humans are murderously intolerant; the aliens intellectually superior.

Despite the fact that Kress has

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put much thought into this concept, it just doesn't come off. Misunderstanding as a plot device (sorry, just had to get back to *that* point) has been with us from Greek legends to TV sitcoms, and how often have you become impatient with a plot which would have been utterly destroyed if two of the characters had just had a sensible, one-minute conversation?

In SF, this extends itself to the misunderstandings between whole cultures and races, and what's hard to believe is that supposedly sophisticated beings, well beyond a certain intellectual level, will still be baffled by the existence of alien differences (not by the differences, mind, but by their existence). Even primitive old twentieth-century humanity has developed the concept of objective anthropology. Kress tries hard to justify the Ged's obtuseness (and admittedly they are bringing their intellectual powers to the problem), but considering that they've been around for literally ages, they come across as singularly limited in scope. (They also have a habit of breaking into little chants of "Harmony sings with us." "May it always sing." "It will always sing." in what seems like every other sentence, irresistibly reminiscent of a barber-shop quartet.)

As for the human characters, for the most part they're about as interesting as any inhabitant of Iran or California who is convinced that *his/her* way is *the* way. And while it's edifying to see a couple of them (one Jelite warrior-healer and one Delysian glass blower in particular) becoming aware of the wonders of science and learning, it's not enough to carry the novel.

Instant

Willow

By Wayland Drew
Del Rey, $3.95 (paper)

Can we please have a moratorium on fantasies featuring half-sized people who live in idyllic rusticism in quaint little villages, who are menaced by magically malign forces from outside, and one of whom must go on a fearsome journey set by an amusing but powerful wizard to save everybody in the world from the dark sorcery emanating from the evil power who lives on or near a volcano? Those are the basics for Wayland Drew's *Willow*, and if it sounds familiar, it is . . . oh, it is.

And to boot, it's crammed into a *very* short novel indeed. Maybe it's the new instant fantasy mix. All the familiar basics are there—just add water and eggs (or *something*), and it will turn into an epic before your very eyes.

(Willow is soon to be a motion picture; this could be the excuse, if not the justification, for its short coming. But, sold as a novel, reviewed as a novel . . .)

Alien Nations

Becoming Alien

By Rebecca Ore
Tor, $3.50 (paper)

Rebecca Ore's *Becoming Alien*

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starts off with just the hint of familiarity. Where have we heard of an average American family who takes in a stranded alien life form who likes cats, and whom they call Alph?

But no, it's not a novelization of a TV series. (Notice that's not ALF, but *Alph*—for Alpha).

But . . . due to the care given Alph by the teen-aged boy in the family, said boy is given what amounts to a scholarship in the space cadet academy of the Federation of Sapient Planets, and goes on to become the first Terran enrollee in said academy.

But no, it's not a juvenile in the best RAH-RAH-RAH (as in Robert A. Heinlein—joke . . .) tradition, where the first Terran space cadet wins his fins by pluck, luck, and unwillingly following the dictates of his old, wise ex-Army teacher (saving the Federation on the way by sheer chance and following the dictates . . . etc.).

No, despite superficial resemblances, *Becoming Alien* is neither of those things, but an intelligent (as opposed to TV fare), realistic, gritty, adult novel. The average American family in this case consists of two orphaned brothers who live in the Southern redneck boonies, the older of whom runs a high-powered drug manufacturing operation in the (well-fortified) basement. (Not TV average, I admit, but maybe more so than those weird families we *do* see on TV.)

Tom, the younger brother, rescues an alien from a burning ship and dubs him Alph. Eventually, the older brother, who harbors Alph because he doesn't want the Feds poking around, kills him (not totally with malice aforethought). Members of Alph's race finally locate Tom and find Alph's final message, which wills his place in the Academy to Tom.

Tom's trials and tribulations as a cadet are not the usual pattern. The main thrust of Ore's novel is the utter alienness of even comprehensible races (the many who make up the Federation are either mammalian or birdlike), and while Tom has an adventure or two, the emphasis is on the mix of aliens, observed with enormous detail and what can only be called realism. There's much emphasis on breeding habits, sexual imperatives, aggressive body language, elimination (a description of a multi-racial public lavatory is something of a tour de force of extrapolation) and other natural/inherited racial characteristics. Xenophobia is a big factor with all concerned; here again in another mode is raised the question of intuitive racial hostility and misunderstanding (see above—*An Alien Light*) versus acquired cultural knowledge and sophistication. And again, perhaps, the scales are tipped too far against cultural objectivity for my taste, but it's an interestingly arguable point.

One problem with the book is that Ore, with all the details that are tossed at the reader, goes almost *too* fast. Key elements in the story are sometimes nearly thrown

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away, and you find it hard to sort out races and characters as they accumulate. But the ability to take a cliché situation and bring to it this kind of originality certainly indicates a talent to be reckoned with.

SF TV

The Best of Science Fiction TV
By John Javna
Harmony Books, $8.95 (paper)

Any book with the title *The Best of Science Fiction TV could* be one of those well-known shortest books ever published, but John Javna has been able to get 144 pages out of the subject somehow. This was accomplished in a complicated way by polling TV critics, SF writers, fans, and various other arcane types, and from this culling a "Top 15" shows for a first chapter, a "Worst 10" for a second chapter, and filling in the rest of the book with the in-betweens. So belying the title, the book is really a survey of SF TV, with a page or more on each show with photos, plot, and background info, and critics' comments.

The result is a rather messily organized look at the history of TV science fiction, with some usable info and a lot of opinionated commentary from various sources which, as with all such, may infuriate the reader or satisfyingly support his/her own opinions. Among the top lot are (of course) *Star Trek* (#1), *The Twilight Zone* (1959-65 series), *Amazing Stories*; and, surprisingly but satisfyingly, *Quark*, a series I spent a lot of time defending as actually having some authentic sophisticated humor (rare enough on TV, even rarer in SF). Leading the "worst" list is *Space 1999* (speaking of humor, in this case unintentional), followed by things such as *The Starlost, Battlestar Galactica*, and *Buck Rogers*.

Artful Deco

Eddy Deco's Last Caper
By Gahan Wilson
Times Books, $14.95

Gahan Wilson. He's the chap, as you know, who's taken over the mantel of the top cartoonist of the macabre, and done so with continuing taste and humor, no small achievement in this tasteless, humorless decade. He amused us for years in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and then moved on to lesser known journals such as *Playboy* and *The New Yorker*. Now he's written us a pastiche detective story that takes Sam Spade against the aliens, and illustrated it in spades (as it were).

While the opening is straight from *The Big Sleep*, with the veiled daughter of the colonel engaging Eddy Deco, private eye, you already know there's something peculiar since also waiting for an appointment is a thing. Deco, with the usual private eye cool, doesn't make a big thing out of this (as it were), and leaves it cooling its heels (if any) in the waiting room. However, the colonel's daughter's problem (the severed finger of her gangster husband) leads Deco into

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a nest of things (tentacles, claws, and what have you). Gee whillikers! Rival gangs of aliens are fighting it out undercover in thirties NYC! Things build to a roaring climax with what seems like every inanimate object in the city (starting with the art deco lamps in a night club) coming alive and attacking our hero. (An ambulatory elevator is particularly nasty, and some lethal heaps of garbage have the Wilson touch.)

The grand finale has every second skyscraper in New York *taking off*! Seems that they were really space ships in disguise.

Wilson's illustrations for this epic silliness are, of course, perfect, and it's a sly touch to have them all (and there are a lot) portray the action through Deco's eyes—*he* is never pictured. This is a subtle *hommage* to the 1946 filming of Chandler's *Lady In the Lake* in which the camera saw the story through the eyes of Philip Marlowe.

E. T. Portraits

Barlowe's Guide to Extraterrestrials

By Wayne Douglas Barlowe, Ian Summers & Beth Meacham
Workman, $10.95 (paper)

Have you ever had the experience of being let down by a book-cover illustration which either didn't show the characters from the book that you wanted to see (particularly a wonderfully-conceived alien that you couldn't *quite* picture from the words alone) or even worse, those characters shown completely at odds with how they're described inside?

Here's another art book from a well-known cover artist in the field, but this one is not just a collection of covers. Wayne Barlowe is one of the rare painters whose work often manages to transcend the publishing-house formula; his is a particularly intelligent talent which is notably good at catching the essence of the story. In other words, unlike many cover artists, he often seems to have actually read the book.

And with *Barlowe's Guide to Extraterrestrials* (first published nine years ago and long unavailable), it became obvious that he had also read other books. What it consists of is full-color portraits of fifty of the major aliens from (mostly) notable works of science fiction, meticulously rendered and very well researched indeed. It takes talent enough to draw known, terrestrial animals for which the artist has models and photographs; did you ever really stop and think how difficult it is to portray a totally *unknown* creature and make it look like it might exist?

Each portrait is accompanied by a description of physical characteristics, habitat, culture and/or reproduction (if any), and subsidiary detail drawings. There's a pull-out chart to give scale for each portrait (reproduced) with the human represented by Barlowe himself.

Not only is the book great fun to look at, but unlike many art books,

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there is just the chance that it might lead the viewer on to actually *read* some of the novels featuring these fabulous beings. How could you resist wanting to know more about the demonic, barb-tailed Overlords from Clarke's *Childhood's End*, or the fragile, many-legged, moth-winged Cinruss of White's *Hospital Station*? Here is an admirable way for those many SF readers who have depended simply on the new releases section for their books to gain an introduction to much of the good stuff from the past.

Classic Sword

The Broken Sword
By Poul Anderson
Baen, $2.95 (paper)

It's hard to believe that up until barely ten years ago, contemporary fantasies were almost nonexistent. There were children's fantasies, there was Tolkien (which most people considered children's fantasy), and there were a bare handful of other works. After an auspicious start in the magazine *Unknown* (edited by the prodigious John W. Campbell, who also more or less shaped modern SF in his other magazine, *Astounding* [now *Analog*]), modern American fantasy limped along confined to a few none-too-classy magazines (*Unknown* had been a victim of the WWII paper shortage). The genre for adults was confined to the cute, the quaint, and the whimsical. (Tolkien would reach best-selling cult status in the sixties—much to the horror of those of us who had discovered him earlier—and true fantasy would not be regarded as a viable "market" by publishers until ten years later.)

Into this wasteland in the mid-1950s came a novel by the young science fiction writer, Poul Anderson, called *The Broken Sword*. It was true high fantasy, but very unlike Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings* was just being published —each volume six months apart—at the time). The prose style was American and direct, and the referential fantasy base was not Anglo/Celtic but high Scandinavian.

It is set in the tenth century, and realistically tells the story of a changeling, a human child captured by elves and raised in the elf mounds. Anderson's elves are not beneficent; they are highly amoral and mostly indifferent to mankind; the major action centers about the great war between the elves of (Danish) Britain and an invasion from the troll kingdoms of Scandinavia. Other mythologies are cleverly worked in, including a chapter set among the *tuatha* of Ireland.

This was the first of Anderson's wonderful fantasies of faerie (*Three Hearts and Three Lions, The Merman's Children, et al.*). And though it's a comparatively short novel it manages, unlike the fantasies complained of above, to suggest the epic with the sense of a whole world of faerie operating in and around that of man. *The Broken Sword*

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might well be considered the first great modern American fantasy.

Shoptalk

First, supplementary information for a review published some months back. I've received a letter from Advent Publishers bemoaning the fact that I simply listed the publisher of James Blish's *The Tale That Wags the God* as "Advent" and quite right they are, since there is another Advent that publishes books. So for the record, the publisher of the Blish volume is Advent: Publishers, Inc. of PO Box A3228, Chicago, IL 60690. I excuse myself from accusations of sloppiness with the feeble out that *this* Advent has been bravely publishing books on SF for so long that I assumed everyone would know who I was talking about.

Sequels and series dept. . . . Part Two of The Malloreon by David Eddings is available: *The King of Murgos* (Del Rey, $16.95) . . . The much-needed sequel to Orson Scott Card's *Seventh Son* has appeared. *Red Prophet* takes place in the same wonderfully conceived alternate United States of nearly two centuries ago, where the superstitions and hexes of our pioneering ancestors are a working system of magic (Tor, $17.95) . . . *Warlord of Antares* by A. Nonymous is (gasp) #37 in the Dray Prescot series and the fourth and last of the interior cycle, the "Witch War Saga" (DAW, $3.50, paper).

You can have some fun with the cover of *The Best of Marion Zimmer Bradley* by trying to identify the SF people portrayed on the multi-character cover. Don't ask me . . . I only got a couple of them. (DAW, $3.95, paper).

As I point out periodically, poetry is a whole different ball game from prose, and I don't feel qualified to judge it in any way. However, that art should by all means be encouraged, particularly in the genres of SF and fantasy which need all the esthetic sensibilities they can get these days. So for those interested, a listing of various manifestations of the poetic muse relating to science fiction and fantasy received over the past few months: *Force Fields* by Andrew Joron (Starmont House, $16.95 cloth, $8.95 paper); *Perception Barriers* by Robert Frazier (Berkeley Poets Workshop & Press, PO Box 459, Berkeley, CA 94701, $5.95, paper); *The Archer In the Marrow: The Applewood Cycles 1967-1987* by Peter Viereck, a novel-length poem whose subject matter could be of interest to readers of SF and fantasy (one chapter appeared in the Rhysling Anthology of the best SF poetry of 1985) (W. W. Norton, $14.95 cloth, $6.95 paper); and a very handsome boxed edition of five of Bruce Boston's books, appropriately entitled *The Bruce Boston Omnibus* (Ocean View Books, Box 4148, Mountain View, CA 94040, $12.95).

And as for prose from the small presses, there's *Discovering H. P. Lovecraft*, edited by Darrell Schweitzer, consisting of various

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articles of literary criticism on HPL (including one titled "Lovecraft's Ladies" which could be a candidate for the shortest article on record; I'm hard put to think of *any* off hand). The volume is #6 of the Starmont Studies In Literary Criticism (Starmont House, $19.95 cloth, $9.95 paper).

C. S. Lewis's famous *The Screwtape Letters* has been reprinted in paperback. It consists of a series of avuncular letters from Screwtape, a rather jovial devil, to his nephew, Wormwood (NAL, $2.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014 ●

NEXT ISSUE

We have a special treat for you next month, as Nebula-winner **Lucius Shepard** returns with our September cover story, "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter." This is a prequel of sorts to Shepard's renowned story "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule," one of 1984's most popular and talked-about stories. Like the earlier story, this one takes place in a land dominated by the immobile but still-living body of an immense, mountain-huge dragon, enchanted into stillness in some sorcerous battle in the unimaginably distant past, so long ago that forests and villages have sprung up on the dragon's mountainous flanks. "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" takes us *inside* the great dragon, inside Griaule itself, to explore a whole new world of enchantment and brutality, terror and wonder, strange dangers and stranger beauties. You won't want to miss *this* one; Shepard at his evocative best. **Ian Watson** is also on hand for September, with a vivid and hard-hitting novella—jammed, as Watson's stuff usually is, with bizarre and innovative new ideas—about visiting aliens who turn out to be a whole lot *more* than just tourists, in "The Flies of Memory," one of Watson's most challenging and exciting pieces ever.

ALSO IN SEPTEMBER: **Kim Stanley Robinson** returns with a thoughtful, intensely-rendered study of a boy's difficult coming-of-age in a future Boston caught in the grip of a deadly Ice Age, in the powerful "Glacier"; the gonzo **Neal Barrett, Jr.** treats us to a story that's strange even by *his* standards, a look into the weird and wonderful world of "Stairs," a place unlike *any* place you've ever been before; **Lisa Goldstein** gives us an unsettling look into an odd sort of afterlife, in "Death Is Different"; and **Richard Mueller** returns to these pages after a long absence, taking us sideways in time to an alternate America for some vivid and scary "Meditations on the Death of Cortes." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstands on July 26, 1988.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The European con season's coming up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (business) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many phones are homes). For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

JUNE, 1988

24-26—**Fantasy Fair.** For info, write: **482 Gardner Rd., Stockbridge GA 30281.** Or call: **(404) 961-2347** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton & Towers downtown. Guests will include: David (Sundiver) Brin. 5000 expected. Comics/media oriented, but there's nothing much else announced for this weekend at press time.

24-26—**MidWestCon. (513) 631-2543 or 984-1447.** Cincinnati OH. Traditional old-timers' relaxacon.

30-July 3—**SF Research Assn., % Mead, 6300 Ocean Dr., Corpus Christi TX 78412.** Academic meet.

JULY, 1988

1-4—**WesterCon. (602) 839-2543.** Phoenix AZ. Robert Silverberg, Craig Miller. West's big annual do.

8-10—**Archon, Box 50125, Clayton MO 63105. (618) 337-9181, (314) 524-6399.** St. Louis MO. Yarbro.

8-10—**LibertyCon, Box 695, Hixson TN 37343.** Sheraton, Chattanooga TN. Dickson, Tucker, Lindahns.

22-24—**UniCon, Box 7553, Silver Spring MD 20907.** Holiday Inn, Annapolis MD. V. (Peace War) Vinge.

22-24—**ConVersion, Box 1088, Stn. M, Calgary AB T2P 2K9. (403) 242-1807.** Silverberg, Ed Bryant.

29-31—**PhroliCon, 652 Van Kirk, Philadelphia PA 19120.** The relaxacon done by the PhilCon people.

29-31—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40258. (502) 449-6562.** Holiday Inn. 900 expected.

29-31—**Ditto, % Glicksohn, 508 Windermere Ave., Toronto ON M6S 3L6.** Like Corflu, for fanzine fen.

29-Aug. 1—**MapleCon, Box 3156, Stn. D, Ottawa ON K1P 6H7. (613) 741-3162.** Clement. Media con.

29-Aug. 1—**MythCon, 90 Camino Real, Berkeley CA 94705. (415) 658-6033** LeGuin. High fantasy.

AUGUST, 1988

5-7—**Conine, % Ivan Towlson, New College, Oxford OX1 3BN, UK.** Terry Pratchett. Oxford Poly campus.

5-7—**OmaCon, 2709 Everett, Lincoln NE 68502.** At the Holiday Inn Central. No guests announced yet.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** WorldCon. $70 to 7/14/88.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. $60 to 7/15/88.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York, NY 10274.** The Hague, Holland. WorldCon. Haldeman. $60 to 12/1/88.

28-Sep. 1—**ConDiego, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115. (619) 265-0903.** NASFiC. $35 at last word.

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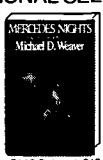

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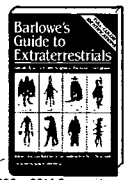

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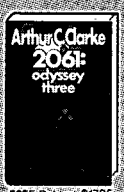

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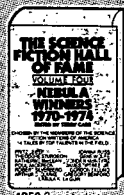

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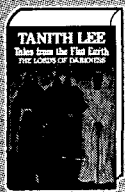

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